



# Polish Insight Project

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## 1.0 Introduction: *The Polish in Britain*

Polish people have become a major presence within Lambeth. The Polish population are increasingly visible in the borough, especially in Streatham, where there are an increasing number of Polish shops and restaurants. However, this visibility is in stark contrast to the representation of Poles within local political forums and decision making processes, where the community is virtually silent. Are the Poles who are making their homes in the borough happy to keep a low profile, or do they lack the tools and experience to make themselves heard? Is Lambeth and the Cooperative Council missing out by not engaging with this large and established minority group?

The Polish government and academia tend to consider Polish emigration to the UK since May 2004 to be financially oriented. The ability of Poles to integrate, coupled with opportunities for work, seem to be why many came to Britain in the first place. But is such mass immigration entirely based on the search for a better paid job or are there other reasons for Polish settlement in the UK?

*“Since 2001 the number of usual residents born in Poland and living in the UK has increased nearly ten-fold from 61,000 in 2001 (1% of the non-UK born population) to 654,000 (8% of the non-UK born population) in 2011. Poland remains the most common country of birth for non-UK born mothers in 2012”.*

<sup>1</sup>

The history of Polish immigration to the UK is not as recent as people might think. It was the Second World War when the roots of Britain’s Polish community really began to form. The Poles made an important contribution to the Allied forces, providing troops, intelligence and war equipment. In 1940, following the fall of France, the Polish Prime Minister established his government-in-exile in London, accompanied by 20,000 soldiers and airmen. Poles were the largest non-British group in the RAF during the Battle of Britain. By the middle of 1945, more than 150,000 Polish troops were serving under the command of the British Army. Winston Churchill’s pronouncement that the *“British would never forget*

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<sup>1</sup> Office of National Statistics: Births in England and Wales by Parents’ Country of Birth, 2012

*the debt they owe to the Polish”* led to the Polish Resettlement Act of 1947, the first mass immigration law which was used by many refusing to return home or fleeing from the newly-established communist government in Poland.

The Second World War and post-war immigration thus laid the foundation for the more recent wave of Polish settlement in the Britain over the last decade. Many believe the enlargement of the EU in May 2004 produced the largest ever wave of Polish immigration to the UK.

*People born in Poland accounted for 14% (531,000) of recent arrivals ... who had arrived since 2001. Half of those ... residents (49%) ... were born in Poland and arrived ... between 2004 and 2006. Nearly all (92%) of Polish born ... residents had arrived since 2001.*<sup>2</sup>

Academics continue to debate Poles' future in the UK, to find out if this wave of immigration is short-term and financially based or whether these migrants are looking for something else and plan to stay here for the long-term.

In September 2013 Stockwell Partnership was commissioned by London Borough of Lambeth to undertake a Polish Insight Project to find out about the Polish community in Lambeth, their perceptions of the borough, their needs and aspirations, and their views on the Polish community and its contribution to Lambeth. This report outlines our process and results. . Often – as can be seen in the report – contradictory views emerge about the Polish community and its sense of belonging. During the focus groups it became clear that Poles have very different views on what ethnicity means to them. Most participants saw themselves as primarily ‘Polish’, but many professionals regarded themselves more as ‘Europeans’ than Poles. This affects the extent to which we can speak about a Polish ‘community’ in Lambeth. This research shows that networks among Polish people in Lambeth are quite loose, and there is little formal community organisation.

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<sup>2</sup> Office for National Statistics, Detailed country of birth and nationality analysis from 2011 Census of England and Wales, 2013.

## 2.0 Methodology

The Polish Insight project involved five focus groups held in different venues during September and October 2013. The groups lasted two hours and were facilitated by Stockwell Partnership's Polish Bilingual Advocate and our EU Grundtvig programme Polish volunteer<sup>3</sup>. Participants were recruited through various channels – the Council's customer centre, Lambeth Council's Twitter account, Stockwell Partnership's network and Bilingual Advocacy clients, Polish websites in the UK (Polish organisations, Polish Embassy, etc.), social media (Facebook and other community network pages), and posters and flyers distributed in Polish shops and restaurants. The largest number of participants came from Stockwell Partnership's existing networks, including our Bilingual Advocacy clients. A total of 40 Poles from Lambeth took part in the focus groups, and three people were individually interviewed. The participants were predominantly from young families. Although young professionals and older people are significant groupings in the Polish population in Lambeth, they were harder to engage in the research. The findings therefore reflect this.

Here are our main research questions:

1. Why does the Polish community want to settle in Lambeth and what do Poles value most in their local area?
3. What are the strengths of the Polish community?
4. What are the needs of the Polish community?
5. What are the aspirations of the Polish community in Lambeth?
6. What is the relationship of the Polish community with Lambeth institutions?

Of the 43 respondents the majority (78%) were female. Six participants didn't record their gender. The majority of respondents (92%) were under 40 (one person didn't record their age). The majority of participants were married (70%), with 23 employed (62%). Six didn't record their employment status. The majority of participants (72%) have been living in UK for more than 5 years. A full breakdown of participants is in Appendix 1.

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<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.grundtvig.org.uk/>

## 3.0 Findings

### 3.1 Living in Lambeth

*“I want to do some voluntary work and get involved in my community but I don’t know how.” Katarzyna G.*

The majority of Polish family members who took part in this research came to the UK hoping for a better life, seeking economic security for themselves and their children. London is the first destination chosen by Polish professionals coming to the UK to improve their English, learn new professional skills and have fun.

The majority of participants intend to stay in the UK permanently, with Lambeth as their chosen destination to settle down. Affordable accommodation, location, other Poles, and attachment to Early Year’s provision are the key factors making them choose Lambeth.

Whilst participants aren’t happy with the long housing list for social housing in Lambeth, reasonable rental prices still make them choose the borough – in fact, affordable private renting is cited as the single biggest factor keeping Polish people in Lambeth. On top of this, Lambeth is seen as a perfect location, with good transport links to the city centre, safe neighbourhoods and lots of activities for residents.

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For the majority of participants, being close to the city centre and their work place is very important. They like the vibrant social and cultural life of Lambeth, referencing local festivals, markets, pubs, and shopping centres. However, they don’t like the rubbish on the streets and the lack of bins.

They value the big range of family oriented facilities in the area including libraries, children's centres, leisure centres, parks, green spaces and swimming pools. The participants also appreciate the friendliness of people in their local neighbourhood. This may reflect the dominance in the focus groups of people with young families.

It is important for Polish families to settle in an area where their family and friends are, and where there is a wider Polish community life and 'infrastructure', e.g. Polish shops, businesses and Polish Saturday School.

Some choose to stay longer in Lambeth because their children attend Lambeth schools. Poles place particular esteem on good schools for their children. However the majority are very dissatisfied with mainstream school education. Most of them have much higher expectations from the educational system in Lambeth.

With the number of Polish families in London increasing, many older Polish people have come to Lambeth to support their grandchildren's upbringing. The majority of these older people don't speak English, which makes integration and dealing with everyday situations difficult. This puts them at risk of social isolation.

In contrast young Polish professionals enjoy Lambeth's social mix and vibrancy. They like the widely available niche products from all over the world as well as local markets selling organic food. They see London as an international social and cultural centre.

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*Bartek – Polish Delicatessen in Streatham High Road*

### **3.2 Strengths of the community**

*“If we can’t do it for ourselves, let’s do it for our children!” Elzbieta G.*

Flexibility, resilience and self-management along with entrepreneurial spirit, being well-educated and having a unique, interesting culture are seen as strengths of the Polish community. Participants are proud of their cultural heritage and traditions, which they see as their biggest asset. They believe their Polish identity needs to be cultivated and passed on to the younger generation. They stress that their culture has a lot to offer and believe it is worth introducing to the wider community.

Poles recognise themselves, and are aware of being seen by the wider community, as hard-working people. A good work-ethic and entrepreneurial abilities (especially in creating small businesses) are pointed out as strengths. Polish people see themselves as a group that actively seeks work and are proud to be strong and visible in the labour market.



Education is highly valued; Poles are very motivated to develop their individual potential. The respondents identified their community as a highly educated group of migrants who achieve work in the UK due to their qualifications. They perceive Poles as ambitious and creative individuals. They consider themselves as a friendly, approachable and well-groomed community that likes challenges and can handle difficult situations. The ability of Polish people to adapt to changing circumstances or environments was emphasised. They refer to themselves as a *fully self-sufficient community* that knows how to build necessary infrastructure and resources, especially within a commercial context.

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However, much of this resilience lies in individuals' personal capabilities, and family relationships, rather than in their wider community relationships. Participants pointed out that Poles can easily come together if necessary but only tend to do so when community or individual crisis strikes. Some shared stories about helping other members of the community and also receiving help from other Poles when they were in difficult financial or emotional situations.

A large number of Polish professionals who come to London are seeking a fresh start and new opportunities. They are setting up a growing number of Polish business ventures and are keen to network with other professional Poles as well as London's diverse, frequently international, business community. Often, they are not interested in working with more 'traditional' Polish organisations based in London which they see as old-fashioned and / or too conservative.



*Polish University Abroad, London*

### **3.3 Community needs**

*“I see many Polish seniors walking their grandchildren to school every morning. They are afraid of going out, just like I was for the first few months. I would love to have an opportunity to meet them.” Bozena P.*

Poles are seeking their own place in Lambeth; they want to be more integrated within their own community and better known by the wider Lambeth community.

There is a strongly perceived need by Polish families with children for a Polish cultural centre in Lambeth, and for advice services delivered in Polish. A number of participants said they were looking for opportunities to socialise with other members of their own community as well as to connect with other ethnic groups in Lambeth. They wanted to share their culture with Lambeth residents. They want to be included in the wider social network and get closer to other Lambeth communities to make the most of the borough's diversity.

Respondents particularly consider Spanish and Portuguese communities to be easy to approach and open towards them. The majority expressed some hesitation in approaching members of the Muslim community, who are perceived as having very strict customs (e.g. niqab / veil) and keeping themselves to themselves. At the same time the Muslim community is admired for claiming its rights collectively as a group. Respondents also have a lot of stereotypes about Africans such as associating them with provoking behaviour, gangs and violence – but at the same time many highlighted positive individual experiences with Africans. The participants describe generally warm feelings towards other Eastern European communities (e.g. Lithuanian, Russian), stressing a sense of cultural similarity. There is great interest in approaching the native British community, establishing positive relationships and presenting Polish culture to them.

Polish culture and tradition is extremely important for the respondents, who expressed a great desire for community initiatives connected with Polish culture. They strongly believe their culture needs to be cultivated and passed on to the next generation. Participants are seeking more activities for all ages run in Polish within existing services. They would like Polish introduced into Lambeth schools as an additional language, or at least to have some after school activities run in their mother tongue. They saw a need for family oriented activities, social events, and Polish holiday celebrations. Poles want to share and celebrate their traditions amongst fellow community members, as well as showcasing it to the wider Lambeth community.

The respondents stated that Poles need to find ways to promote a positive image of the Polish community in Lambeth and break down negative stereotypes about themselves. They don't want to be seen as 'Eastern Europeans who come to the UK to claim welfare benefits or take other people's jobs'. They are unhappy with generalisations about Poles drinking vodka and working only as a cheap manual labour. They want to be accepted and welcomed by the local community. They want to share their culture and traditions with others focusing on what actually happens in their nation, and not in the vast eastern part of Europe. Fears about being the object of negative stereotypes of Polish people have discouraged some of them from identifying as Polish, asserting their rights, or developing a strong Polish community representation.

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There is a strong desire to have a Polish community centre which facilitates community oriented activities in Polish and which gives families advice on life in the UK. Poles want to be treated with more respect by Lambeth Council workers and have access to Polish speaking officers or interpreters if needed. There is a high demand for ESOL classes (also accessible during the weekends) and there is a need for the Council's website to be translated into Polish.

Polish professionals' needs are different, with a much greater focus on personal development and gaining new qualifications. Some would like to share their knowledge and skills with other Poles by offering their services through establishing a socially-oriented enterprise. They are willing to support the Polish community but not voluntarily. Other professionals have no interest in participating in Polish community life as they are focused on their own goals and achievements. They frequently don't feel any attachment to their country and prefer to be seen as Europeans. Their strong English language skills mean that they easily establish relationships with people from a wide range of communities as opposed to just Polish.



*Polish Cultural Institute, London*

### **3.4 Aspirations and hopes for the future**

*“I would love to organise a local marathon up to 5 km for charity” - Helena N.*

Participants stated that Polish people generally have high hopes for a better life in the UK; it is not only Polish professionals who have these aspirations. Generally, Poles strive for better paid jobs and satisfying careers, financial stability, stronger community cohesion and most of all a better start in life for their children. The language barrier is a major factor in their career development. The research participants were looking for permanent, secure and well-paid jobs or aim to set up their own business

Professionals educated to degree level aspire to jobs that fully correspond to their Polish qualifications. However, they acknowledge that this is often very difficult. Their

qualifications are not always fully recognised, which leads them to take work below their education level and causes feelings of frustration. To improve this situation, they want to gain more professional qualifications and are committed to studying to make it happen. Many of them would also like to set up their own businesses or charities in future.

Family aspirations of the participants are focused around their children's needs, especially a decent education and access to additional creative activities linked to Polish culture and traditions. Polish parents put high expectations on themselves to provide a good education for their children. They want them to attend the best schools in Lambeth because they believe this is the key to their future success. Where necessary, they are happy to leave the borough for a better school elsewhere. Participants want their children to grow up knowing about Polish culture and being familiar with Polish traditions. Polish parents identified a need for better integration and community involvement among adults so their children could benefit from a stronger community. They are highly motivated to engage in community life for their children's benefit because they see a big gap in community cohesion and a lack of activities run in Polish for the younger generation.

Older Polish participants aspire to improve their English, adjust better to the British way of life, and find flexible jobs that enable them to care for their grandchildren. They seek financial stability for their future retirement. They would like to meet more people and form a social network that enables them to share experiences and feel more at home in the UK.

The language barrier is a major factor in their career development. Poles are looking for permanent, secure and well-paid jobs or aim to set up their own business.

Participants expressed the need to bring the community together and to challenge negative stereotypes about themselves. They want to be accepted and welcomed by the local community, and to promote their culture to others. They aspire to build good relationships with other communities, especially the native British.



Polish press in the UK

### 3.5 Community cohesion, integration and living with stereotypes

*“You Poles can come straight from the airport to claim benefits”- that’s what they told me at Job Centre’ – Ania R.*

Participants also raised a lot of concerns about the Polish community. Many said they didn’t feel like they belonged to, or have formed positive relationships within, their own community. They feel there is very limited support offered by the Polish community as a whole. The respondents expressed a great need for more disinterested support and socially oriented (as opposed to profit-oriented) initiatives within the Polish community. They tend to rely on paid-for Polish services and claim they are satisfied with them. However, they also wish the Polish community could see the benefits of building a strong supportive network for its own sake and not just for economic benefits. Participants also identify a strong need for more family- and community-oriented support by the local authority in their native language, so they do not have to pay Polish businesses to deal with issues such as their national insurance applications, social security benefits, etc. They recognise this would require changing the attitudes of Polish people too.

Community cohesion and integration is seen by many participants as non-existent. They see Poles as living separate lives focused mainly on their close family or a small group of friends. Participants are disappointed that most interactions between Poles and existing

community services are extremely business-oriented. Internal relationships between the Polish community are not strong enough.

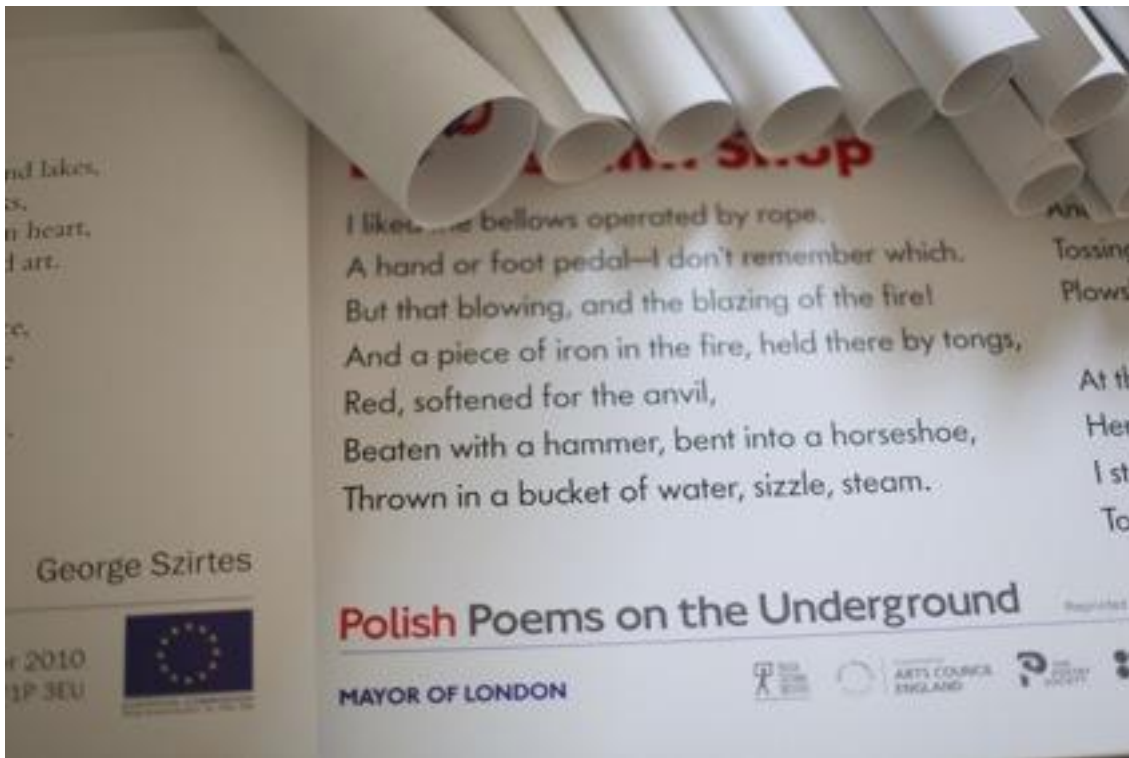
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Elderly Poles (and their children) express concern about the lack of opportunities for older people to meet up with other older members of the community. It was highlighted that a Polish grandparent who arrives in the UK to support their grandchild's upbringing often experiences loneliness and a high level of stress due to language and cultural barriers. There is a lack of services for vulnerable old people who are often struggling to cope with day to day situations in a culturally different environment.

Participants referred to a lot of stereotypes about other communities circulating among Poles, but at the same time recognised the values and good practice that they would like to learn from others. They stressed the need to change Polish attitudes towards being more open and outgoing as a community. They are concerned about being the object of negative stereotyping themselves, which discourages them from being open and communicating assertively.

The focus group discussions show that Poles have very limited knowledge about groups, organisations and services in Lambeth that might offer support. They don't know of any services provided for them in their native language except by Stockwell Partnership (who supports Lambeth families with accessing early year's provision, facilitates sessions for children 0-5 in Polish at children's centres; helps with understanding and applying for welfare benefits and cares for families in need). This could reflect the relatively weak networks connecting Polish people in Lambeth, which makes information sharing hard. However, it could also reflect the fact that there are not as yet many Polish community organisations either representing, or serving the community.





*Polish Poems displayed on posters in trains carriages across London*

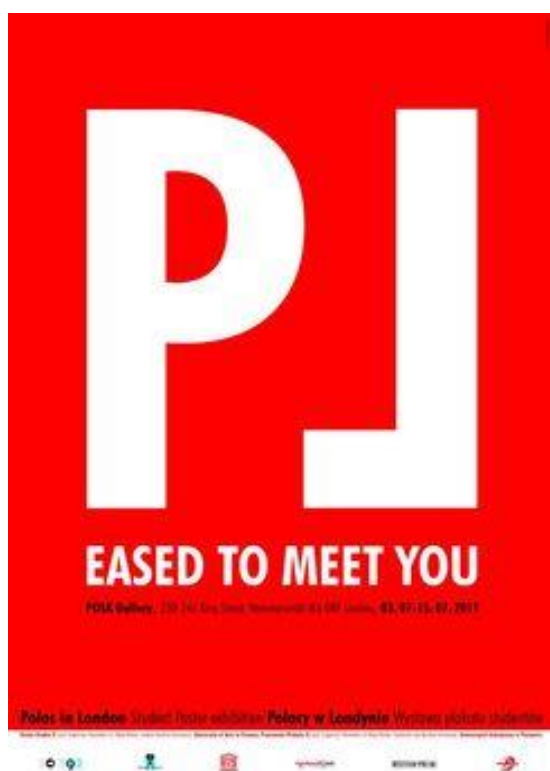
### **3.6 Accessing council and public services**

*“What can Lambeth Council do for us? Start to listen!” – Tomasz C.*

Interactions between participants and Lambeth Council are very limited, with the most common interface being via the Housing Department. Participants’ experience of dealing with housing officers is very disappointing. They felt officers weren’t really interested in helping them. They feel that local public services, particularly housing officers and Job Centre Plus employees, can be prejudicial towards them. They claim officers have made highly inappropriate remarks towards them (e.g. about Polish people only coming to the UK to take advantage of the social benefits, or being too old to participate in professional development courses). Some respondents felt certain officers treated them unequally, favouring people from their ‘own’ community.

Polish families in Lambeth who took part in this research most commonly used children's centres, schools, Job Centre Plus, housing services, Stockwell Partnership, Citizens Advice Bureau, The Gaia Centre, Women Like Us, Shelter and Family Action. The most popular services among the Polish professionals are: Macmillan Cancer Support, Music for Children, Buddhist Centre and Mary Sheridan Centre.

Although many participants have had negative experiences when contacting the Council and other public service providers, many expressed willingness to engage in future initiatives supporting the Polish community (49%). The majority are happy to support the Council to help the Polish community meet its needs when they become more confident in speaking English.



*Polish poster*

## 4.0 Conclusion

The majority of participants in the focus groups were parents under 40 years old. This resulted in many discussions about family needs and wellbeing. There were a number of older participants who provided insights into elderly people's needs and expectations. Despite wide promotion through Polish social media and the internet there was little interest amongst young single professionals in participating in the focus groups.

Participants see a lot of strengths in the Polish community but a lack of encouragement, information sharing, and sense of belonging within their own community stop them from engaging in community initiatives. Coming together to make the Polish community stronger and more visible isn't a priority – the need has to be authentic, and the action meaningful, for the Polish community to act. Participants have many stories of helping each other on an individual level, but generally do not feel a strong sense of belonging to the Polish community.

Two main areas of aspiration stressed by the participants are employment and further education. Financial security and stability are very important for Poles which means they strive for better paid jobs (even pensioners), and often set up businesses or invest in property. They are concerned about their future pensions in the UK.

Family aspirations are mainly focused on the next generation. Parents are looking for a high standard of education for their children, associated by many with early year's investment. They see a good education as a guarantee of a better financial life for the next generation. Poles are keen to see more support for bilingualism, as well as more activities run in Polish for children and young people. They recognise that introducing their children to their cultural heritage helps keep an interest in their country of origin and helps with family bonding, especially with grandparents and the wider family back in Poland. Polish activities can help to minimize the risk of isolation and build a sense of community.

Participants wish to know more about other communities in Lambeth and share their culture with the wider community. There is increasing awareness that building a cohesive Polish community will be beneficial, especially for future generations of Poles in the UK. Poles observe how other communities promote their own culture and feel that they are missing something by not doing the same. There seems to be a lot of potential in the Polish

community, but it needs encouragement and the tools to realise it. Participants are willing to engage with the Cooperative Council to make things happen for their community. However, they need external support to bring their community together as well as to connect with the wider Lambeth community.

## 5.0 Recommendations

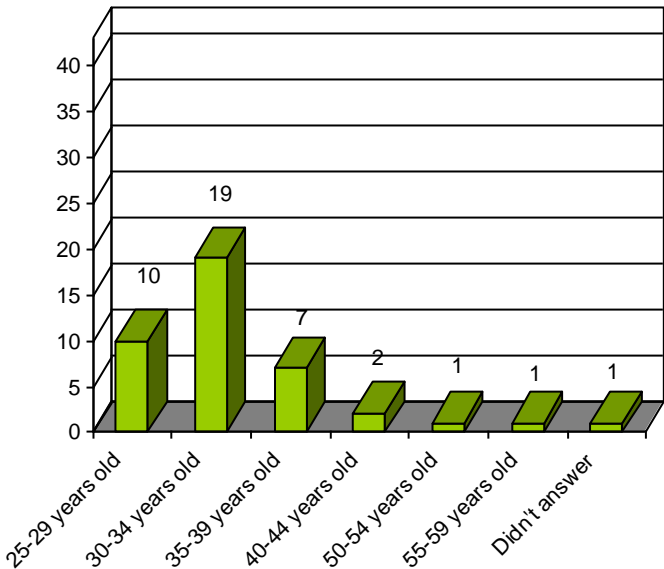
Here is a summary of the recommendations made by the focus group participants:

- More affordable family oriented events held in Polish
- Polish speaking groups should be supported, as these can increase the number of Poles participating in wider community life
- Bilingual Polish sessions in Early Years provision and Lambeth schools can help Poles feel respected as part of the wider community
- Lambeth service providers need to offer more community activities and events in Polish - particularly story-telling, singing, and art and craft workshops for children; festivals and community days for the whole community; and coffee mornings for older people
- Information sessions about British schools' approach to teaching and learning are needed for Polish parents to better understand the UK education system
- Creating Polish support groups for the most vulnerable community members would help when individual or community crises occur
- There is a need for wider family support and advice for Poles in Lambeth who don't speak English
- A Polish Community Centre could bring Poles together, empower them and raise their confidence as an ethnic minority group – this would be a good start for building relationships with the wider community. Poles are looking for a friendly space where they could run Polish activities and present their culture to others. A Community Centre could provide information about existing and available services in Lambeth in Polish and English.
- Separate activities should be developed for different age groups, giving them the opportunity to share experiences – particularly parents and elderly people

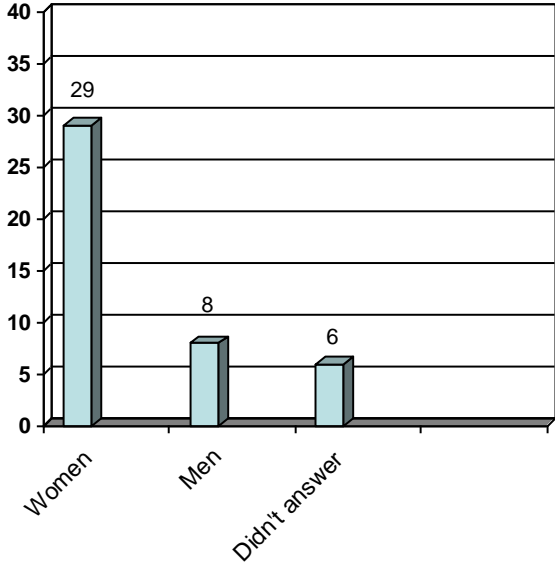
- There should be more activities focused around children and young people, since the next generation are a great motivator for Poles and therefore crucial to community building
- There is a need to address negative stereotyping which detracts from Poles' confidence in Lambeth. This could be done through more training for frontline council staff in equalities issues, and providing Lambeth residents and Council workers with specific knowledge about things such as the number of Polish people claiming benefits etc. Improved monitoring of the quality of customer service is required e.g. in Job Centres and housing departments to ensure there is less discrimination
- Information in Polish about available courses, job opportunities and support for business initiatives would help Poles to get better jobs
- Lambeth Council and its partners need to identify community resources and start to shape an action plan / tester activities etc. with the Polish community

# 7.0 Appendix 1: Monitoring data

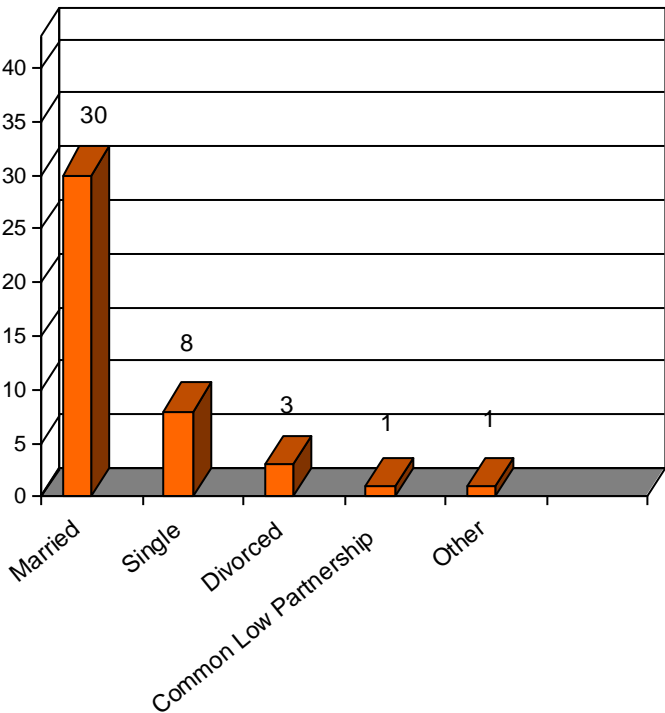
Age



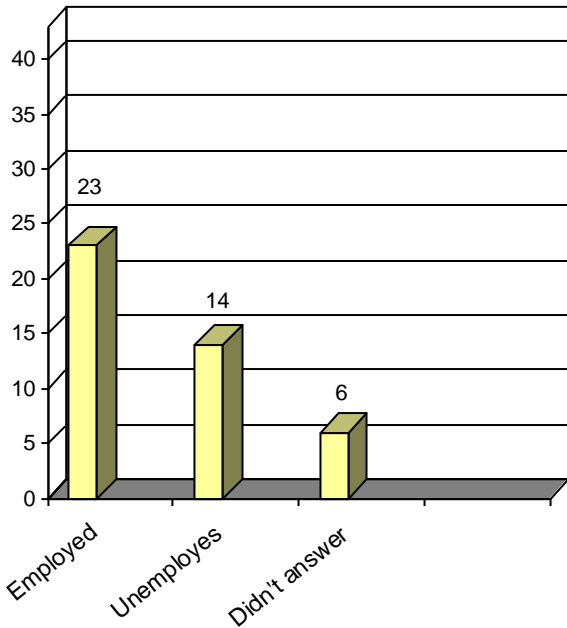
Sex



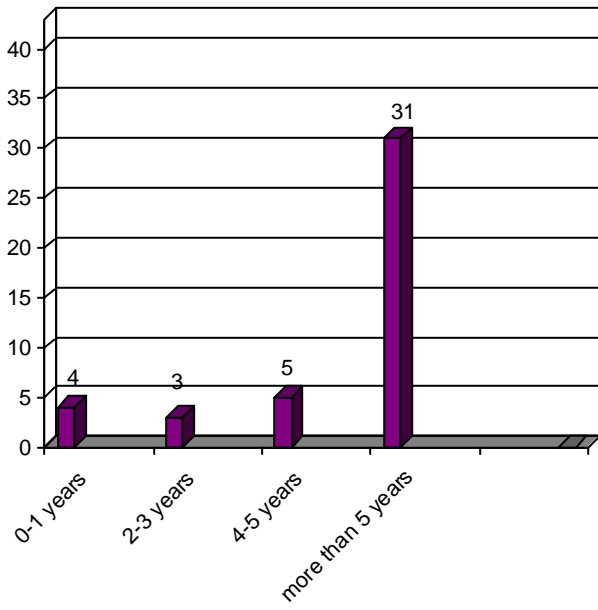
Marital Status



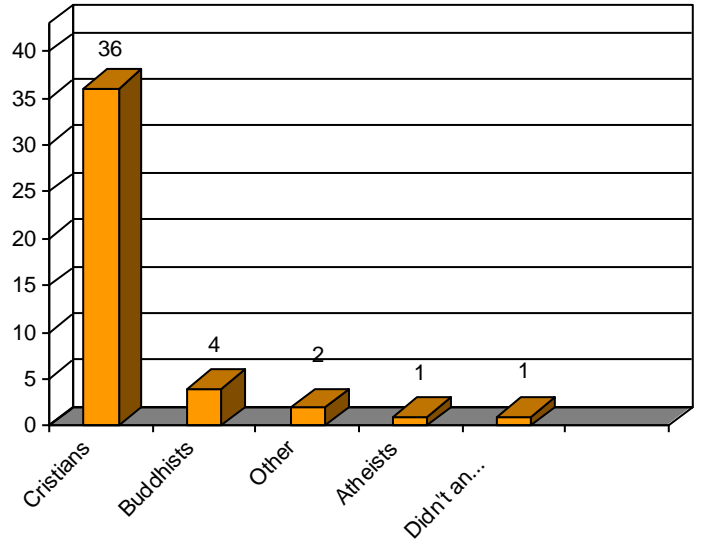
Employment



Living in the UK



Religion





## Appendix 2: Flyer

**Mieszkaś lub pracujesz w Gminie Lambeth?**

**Masz wolne dwie godziny w sobotnie popołudnie?**

**Chcesz zrobić coś dobrego dla innych?**

**Przyjdź na spotkanie!!**

Jesteśmy przedstawicielami organizacji Stockwell Partnership udzielającej bezpłatnego wsparcia Polakom w Wielkiej Brytanii. Obecnie poszukujemy osób, które zgodziłyby się wziąć udział w spotkaniu na temat warunków życia w Lambeth.

**Twój udział pomoże w projektowaniu i realizowaniu skutecznych działań na rzecz polskiej społeczności i całej społeczności Lambeth! Wystarczy, że odpowiesz na parę bardzo prostych pytań i wyrazisz swoją opinię na temat miejsca, w którym żyjesz.**



**Data: 28 09 2013 (sobota) godz. 14**

**Adres: Stockwell Partnership: 157 South Lambeth Road, SW8 XN**

**Dla uczestników został przewidziany poczęstunek .**

**Spotkanie odbędzie się w języku polskim.**

Inicjatorem spotkania są władze lokalne gminy Lambeth pragnące poznać i odpowiedzieć na potrzeby polskich mieszkańców. Więcej informacji na ten temat w j. polskim: 07530908785

**Serdecznie zapraszamy!**



### Appendix 3: Pictures



*Focus group, Stockwell Partnership, 28/09/13*



*Focus group, The White Lion, 6/10/13*





*Focus group, White Eagle Club, 15/09/13*



*Focus group, Weir Link Children's Centre, 26/09/13*