

## “Love Thy Polish Neighbour”

To learn how to counter the ‘Polish-Vermin’ stereotype I met up with an amazing woman – Gosia McKane. She is the director of a non-profit organisation called [Merseyside Polonia](#). Gosia sees her institute as “the bridge” between Polish culture and the multicultural society of Liverpool.



Photo credit: Aldona Wandzel Photography – “Gosia”

The 23th of June 2016 has become a significant date for many foreigners living in the UK. Brexit was not simply a political vote, Brexit has changed people’s attitudes and transformed British politeness and tolerance into hostility. This is why [xenophobic attacks](#) on Polish people after the referendum did not surprise me.

Racist graffiti and offensive notes appeared in London, calling Poles “Vermin” and encouraging them to leave the UK. But Liverpool was different. Gosia explains why.

Gosia describes Merseyside Polonia as a ‘safe place’ for people to come, meet and learn about each other. The goal is to build a relationship with the local population and promote the positive effects of Polish immigration. Over the years she has mastered the counter narrative. While I intended to find out how her association fought against discrimination, she stopped me and added *“When we try to fight the problem, we sometimes promote its existence.”*



Photo credit: Mirror - “London racist note”

Gosia admitted that when many Polish people came to the UK in 2004, she noticed that negative stories about Poles dominated the British news. But, in reality, she was surrounded by little shops with traditional Polish food, interesting and ambitious people who adapted very well to society. Polish culture, in Gosia’s opinion, *“enriches this city and adds something new.”* People tend to think that Polish people are moving to the UK with only one goal in mind: to work and to save money. She disagrees *“We are bringing here more than this, we are bringing here our whole lives and our culture. We make this place our home, we send our children to English schools, we want to be happy and safe.”*

I was curious to find out how British people benefit from the existence of Merseyside Polonia in Liverpool. Gosia explained to me that on an everyday basis she cooperates with local police, with the Mayor of Liverpool, with the City Council and with local media such as BBC Radio Merseyside. She gave me this example *“Polish people have negative feelings about the police. When they see an officer in uniform they do not open the doors. The police asked me why and I explained to them how to deal with it.”* Cooperation with local services is not the only thing, MP organises various events, festivals and meetings. Gosia says that English people participate in the activities with real enthusiasm. *“The Easter workshops organised every year in the Museum attract over 200 locals. In addition to the traditions we cultivate and teach people about, we also hosted the Mayor of Liverpool. He answered our questions, we talked about the problems and successes of the Polish community.”*

On top of that MP promotes Polish culture. Movie nights at FACT cinema, Polish poetry evenings and classical music concerts are very popular, and not only for Polish speakers. This way they try to overcome cultural differences. Gosia says *“Culture and art are what brings us together.”*

*“So, Brexit did not stop you? What about the racist attacks?”* She confirmed that Liverpool resisted the crisis very well. Liverpool voted strongly to ‘Remain’. The city itself, as Gosia says, is built on migration and on diversity. Liverpoolians appreciate and endorse it. Shortly after the referendum, MP took the initiative to educate the community about the meaning and significance of hate crimes. Gosia says that discrimination towards Polish people is different than that towards other nationalities. *“Stereotypically Polish people are perceived as poor, as potential factory workers or cleaners. These kinds of jobs are the firsts offered to them in job centres. But if all Polish people would leave the UK, this country would lose a lot of professional businessmen, doctors, lawyers and entrepreneurs.”*

MP does not plan to change after Brexit. Gosia is confident that showing people the positives, hard work and continuing to unite the community is the best way to maintain good relations. She says that inviting others to join the family festivals with the opportunity



Photo credit: Merseyside Polonia – “Polish Film Poster”



to dance and enjoy sport is the most valuable way to teach them something about Polish heritage in England. *“Social cohesion succeeds when we are not focused on the problems and do not make them a norm.”*

Gosia is proud of what Merseyside Polonia has done in Liverpool over the last 10 years. *“On Remembrance Sunday in November, we are invited to lay flowers at the Cenotaph on St George’s Plateau. During the Jewish Service we are representing Liverpool’s Polish community. We are respected and recognised.”*

MP shows that Liverpool is home for many cultures, stronger in the unity and able to counter any vote to LEAVE.