



Romani Project, University of Manchester
Commentary on Manchester City Council document: 'Roma Strategy 2011-2014', March 2013

The document highlights the discrepancies between outside perception and the internal reality of the Romani community. These are apparent especially in relation to several key indicators of social inclusion and participation:

School attendance. The document reports in Par. 2.1 that local residents had expressed concerns that “Roma children did not attend school”. In Par. 2.2 however it is emphasised that school attendance is constrained not by the attitudes of the Roma but by the availability of school places (an issue already flagged in our own report from October 2009). Indeed, in Par. 2.3 it is made clear that once local schools make an effort to “break down barriers” then the principal obstacle to school attendance can be removed. Par 3.9 even acknowledges that “the attendance rates of Roma children are now outstripping the attendance rates of non-Roma children”.

Criminality. The document reports in Par. 2.1 on a “perception that the Roma community was supported by organised crime networks”, but clearly concludes that these suspicions were not justified and that no evidence was found of any organised criminal activity. In Par. 2.6 the document goes on to mention that suspicions on the part of agencies and resulting investigations actually delayed the integration process. It seems obvious that accusations of criminality are not only deeply entrenched in baseless prejudice, but that they at times even cloud the judgement of agencies and thus constitute obstacles to social inclusion and to productive and respectful community relations.

Employment. Par. 3.4 of the document claims that “many Roma residents are not engaged in any form of meaningful economic activity”, and Par. 2.1 reports of local residents’ perception that Roma enjoyed “a comfortable lifestyle without appearing to work”. At the same time, Par. 3.5 clearly identifies the legal situation and lack of skills as constraining economic opportunities in the Roma community. Like many other underprivileged communities, Roma depend on available earning opportunities, and these often include state benefits as well as

charitable support from organisations and individuals. We feel that it is important not to make moral judgements about what kind of work is or isn't "meaningful" or economically "productive", but to respond instead, as the document indeed proposes, to the need to increase employability by removing legal obstacles and where possible by supporting the development of skills.

Marriage. The document makes reference to Roma 'marriage' in inverted commas (Par. 2.4 and 4.1), and addresses issues of "safeguarding" in relation to married girls moving in with their in-laws. Marriage is sanctioned in Romani communities through approval of the extended families and not necessarily through formal registration with state institutions. This is not unique to Romani communities, and it does not seem to pose any issues in other population groups, either. Nor are there any inherent issues arising from the fact that married young women tend to join the households of their spouses and in-laws, a custom that again is shared by other communities. We agree that the issue at stake is not a moral judgement on cultural practices, but rather the importance of safeguarding, especially of minors. To our knowledge, no cases of either forced marriages or under-age marriages in the Roma community in Manchester have so far come to the attention of authorities.

Residence. The document makes reference to the fluctuation in tenancy patterns (Par. 3.12), correctly implying that there is a culture-based pattern of sharing information within the Roma community about the availability of property and of making use of opportunities to occupy property in proximity to family relations; this aspect was also highlighted in our report from October 2009. The document further identifies the administrative challenges that this pattern creates for local authorities, in particular in connection with tax collection. We view this as a good example of why it is beneficial for local authorities to seek a permanent dialogue with the Roma community, not least in order to enable a smooth running of administrative procedures, which normally fail to take into account the cultural norms and needs of the Roma community. The guiding principle must be anchored in the realisation that Roma practise their culture not in order to deliberately defy local rules and regulations; the challenge is to find a way to allow Roma to reconcile their cultural practices with compliance with rules and regulations, and this can only be furthered through constructive dialogue and information.

Cleanliness. The document cites complaints directed at the Roma in connection with waste management (Par. 2.10, 3.1, 3.3, 4.1), but it clearly states that street cleaning and waste management "have not been exclusively Roma issues" in the neighbourhood, and that "Roma families are able to observe neighbourhood standards – particularly with regard to waste management". Once again we are able to identify a discrepancy between outsider perception and prejudice, and the reality on the ground, in particular the Roma community's ability and willingness to respond to direct engagement and communication efforts on the part of local agencies.

Conclusion

Manchester City Council's 'Roma Strategy' correctly observes that judgemental attitudes and outright prejudice and pre-conceptions exist toward Roma, both among local residents and within the ranks of local agencies. They relate to issues of criminality, school attendance, work, residence patterns and family structures, and cleanliness. These prejudices and pre-conceptions often constitute practical obstacles to social inclusion and participation of Roma. The document shows that it is beneficial to engage directly with the Roma community rather than to condemn Roma behaviour on a wholesale basis. In particular, the document highlights the enormous benefits of directly informed decisions over strategies that are guided by suspicion and pre-conception. Thus the successful measures described in Par. 2.7-2.8 were taken in response to recommendations made by the Romani Project in a report commissioned by Manchester City Council, a report that was based on a survey of attitudes and articulated needs carried out among members of the Roma community in September-October 2009. The document also highlights the positive role of school integration efforts, training provisions, targeted outreach work and a firm stand against defamation and prejudice.

The principal message that can be derived from the Manchester experience is therefore that Roma must not be regarded as a 'problem' but as a vulnerable group that is severely affected by a lack of resources and skills, by a history of marginalisation, and by continuing stigmatisation and suspicion on the part of both local residents and institutions, and which is therefore in need of specially targeted support provisions.

Romani Project
School of Arts, Languages and Cultures
University of Manchester
Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, UK
romani@manchester.ac.uk
+44 - 161 - 275 5999