



The University of Manchester



January 2015

‘Roma Consultation Forum’: A MigRom project initiative in partnership with Manchester City Council

Background

The MigRom project (‘The immigration of Romanian Roma to western Europe: Causes, effects and future engagement strategies’) was launched in the spring of 2013 for a four-year period with funding from the European Commission’s Seventh Framework research programme. The project is a consortium that includes academic partners in the UK, Italy, France, Spain and Romania, as well as Manchester City Council and the European Roma and Traveller Forum, an umbrella organisation of Roma NGOs that is affiliated with the Council of Europe. The project investigates the participation of Roma migrants in the fields of housing, access to services, employment, and education, as well as local authority policies and engagement strategies with Roma migrants and public attitudes to Roma. The consortium also seeks to set new standards of collaboration between researchers, local government, and Roma representation. The individual academic partner projects are all led by senior academics with a track record of research in Romani studies; they work with specialist junior researchers and Roma research assistants. The partnership with Manchester City Council revolves around the provision of outreach services to the local Roma community, especially those from Romania. To this end, the project employs three outreach workers – two of whom are Roma, one is an EAL teacher of Romanian background – who work closely with the City Council’s Regeneration Team. The outreach workers run weekly drop-in sessions and offer a range of support and advice services. They also feed back observations to the research project and the City Council. In this way, practice is guided by evidence and the research is in turn directly informed by the practical outreach work. The project also tries to monitor and assess local authority interventions on Roma and aims to provide advice for the drafting of evidence-based policy. One of the project’s explicit objectives is:

“To assess policy measures targeting migrant Roma communities in an integrated way that takes into consideration both the articulated views and needs of the Roma migrants and the position of the local authority; to make use of the participation of a local authority in the project to draft, test, implement and assess the impact of a variety of measures of advice and support, capacity building and consultation offered to the Roma migrant community”

Part of the project’s schedule of deliverables is the **Consultation Forum for Roma**. The project application submitted to the European Commission in 2012, which forms the basis of the project contract signed by the partners, contains the following description of the Consultation Forum:

“The study will be combined with a pilot engagement scheme led by a local authority Manchester City Council. The scheme draws on Manchester’s engagement strategy with the community of Roma migrants over the past few years. The project will expand this strategy by introducing further measures for capacity-building within the community, provisions for advice and support services and the creation of a consultation forum that will allow Roma migrants to take part in planning and decision-making processes affecting their community. ... The [project’s] outreach workers will support Council officials in setting up and running a regular consultation forum within the local Roma community which will act as a clearing house for issues with local services, authorities and non-Roma residents.”

This deliverable was designed specifically in order to follow up on various calls by Manchester City Council to set up ties with community leaders. The University of Manchester was commissioned in August 2009 by the City Council’s Chief Executive Department to recommend an engagement strategy with the Roma community in Gorton South. The brief included

“to identify individuals with a potential leadership or mediation role ... and to consider ways in which these individuals might be involved in discussions surrounding the general situation and future of their community” (Romani Project report “The Romani community in Gorton South, Manchester, October 2009, p. 4).¹

Following this report, the City Council’s *Citizenship and Inclusion Overview and Scrutiny Committee*, in the minutes of its meeting held on 14 October 2009, recorded:

¹ <http://romani.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/downloads/2/report.pdf>

“The Chair referred to an increase in the presence of the Roma community living in the ward he represented. He felt that community cohesion would be strengthened where community leaders could be identified and the Council could begin to communicate with them to ensure that the area could cater for the change in the community.”

This call was later reiterated by the City Council’s *Communities Scrutiny Committee* in the minutes of its meeting from 13 November 2013:

“The Lead Member for Race emphasised the importance of including the Roma community in any consultations and encouraging them to take the lead.”

The need for direct consultation with Roma, and the need for Roma to take the lead on initiatives that concern their community, was thus flagged by Manchester City Council on more than one occasion. The MigRom partnership has taken on the challenge to facilitate such a process.

‘Roma Leadership Group’

At the outset of the project in June 2013 the idea of the Consultation Forum was reviewed and it was agreed to proceed initially through a period of casual observation and canvassing of opinions within the community, identifying individuals with an interest in acting as informal spokespersons for the community, and through gradual capacity building. In October 2013, a number of individuals answered the MigRom project’s call to take part on a regular basis in the project’s activities, and in June 2014 they were invited by MigRom to join the project’s Roma outreach workers and together to act as an informal ‘Roma Leadership Group’. The project supported through personnel contribution including administrative and task supervision, office space, promotion and communications, and printing and dissemination of leaflets. Below we document a report compiled by three of the Roma participants who took part, alongside the MigRom project’s Roma Outreach workers, in this activity between June-December 2014.

=====

Report by Daniel Moise, Nicolaus Tanase, and Samuel Filipache

Background and objectives of group

We are a group of young Romanian Roma. Our families and other Roma families from various countries have been in Manchester since the early 2000s. At that time the word ‘Roma’ was not used. British people referred to us simply as citizens of our own countries. Things slowly changed and by

2008 the word 'Roma' started to be used more often. At the same time more Romanian Roma came and settled in Manchester. There was, and still is, some confusion between Roma and Romanian. Roma are a minority in all European countries: there can be Roma that are Romanian citizens, Roma that are Polish citizens and so on. At the same time not all Romanians are Roma.

Around 2010 we were each doing different things. Nicolaus, 19 and living with his parents, was selling magazines to help support his family. Daniel, 17, was volunteering for Manchester City Council Youth Services and for various youth sport associations. Samuel, 15, was attending high school at Cedar Mount. At this moment the Big Life Company and the Romani Project at the University of Manchester started a training programme for young Roma people. Nicolaus and Daniel joined the training and a few months later they were working as classroom assistants and outreach workers with the Council International New Arrivals Team, BHA for Equality or other organizations. Samuel was involved in some of the activities that BHA run at Cedar Mount with the help of Nicolaus and Daniel's colleagues. These experiences gave us skills, confidence and a better understanding of life in Manchester. Samuel finished college and decided to study business at the university, Daniel applied at college to study youth work and Nicolaus looked for a better job and, when employment restrictions for Romanians were removed, he got a job at a local biscuit factory. At the same time we saw that there were more opportunities for engagement and that we could do more for the Roma community and our neighbourhoods. We noticed three main things:

- Unlike other communities, Roma in Manchester had no organised voice defending their interests
- Many non-Roma had some prejudices against the Roma, for example that we were responsible for littering
- As a result relationships with our non-Roma neighbours were limited

In June 2014 the MigRom project, as part of their strategy to establish a Roma Consultation Forum, invited us to join the project's Roma outreach workers and together act as an informal 'Roma Leadership Group'. Their ideas for more Roma representation were similar to ours and we agreed to take the lead on two activities:

- A campaign in Longsight, Levenshulme and Gorton South to raise awareness about recycling, clean our neighbourhoods and contrast the prejudice about Roma littering
- A series of meetings with local Councillors, to understand their awareness about the Roma community and the issues that concern us

What was done and why

To start our first activity, we produced a leaflet in the main languages spoken in our neighbourhoods, encouraging everyone to care for our neighbours by properly recycling rubbish. As part of the second activity, MigRom staff showed us various minutes from Council Committees meetings and the report by BHA for Equalities about their project for safeguarding young Roma girls. We were surprised to find out that the only issues talked about in these documents were the supposed risks for Roma girls to be forced to marry young and leave education. This was a strong contrast with what all the Roma we know are concerned with: finding good jobs and school places for their children. We then decided to ask the Councillors for support in our campaign against stereotypes and at the same time discuss with them these documents and the danger that the image of the Roma they offer could increase prejudice against us.

During summer we met with Councillors Bernard Stone, Peter Cockson, Abid Latif Chohan, Aftab Ahmed, Dzidra Noor and Suzanne Richards by attending their surgeries or at neighbourhood events like the opening of a new play area at Crowcroft Park and at a litter pick along the Fallowfield Loop organised by KeepLevyTidy. All Councillors reacted very positively to our campaign to fight prejudice against the Roma and Councillor Richards offered to organise a more formal meeting to discuss how the Council could support it. At the same time, the Councillors did not seem aware of the issues discussed in the Council documents or of how problematic they were for the Roma community.

The first meeting organised by Councillor Richards took place on October 6th, 2014 and we were very happy to see how all Councillors present (Noor, Chohan, Rahman, Richards, Stone) offered to put us in touch with other neighbourhood associations and to provide equipment for a series of litter picking activities in November. We offered to advertise the activities by adding an invitation to residents to our recycling awareness leaflets. We then asked the Councillors about the content of the documents that were worrying us, especially how that information had been collected, by whom and if its accuracy had been checked. We pointed out how we felt it was unfair that the issue of safeguarding was regarded as a cultural problem of the entire Roma community. We explained that ‘teenage marriage’ among the majority of Roma families is not an imposition but a relationship between teenagers, approved and supported by both families. We also explained how these relationships are not registered, but are simply accepted by the Roma community. The Councillors seemed to understand our worries and, as they were not involved in the writing of the documents, Cllr. Richards offered to organise a meeting with the officers who had contributed to the documents and could answer our questions. She also asked us to send her our questions to pass them to the officers so that they will be prepared for the meeting.

What we achieved and what we did not achieve

The campaign in Longsight, Levenshulme and Gorton South was a great success. We achieved to make other residents aware that Roma care for their neighbourhoods. During the three weeks of campaign around 30 Roma residents joined us. This was a great occasion for them to meet residents from other communities and associations like the staff at Sure Start and Crowcroft Park Primary Schools, the Youth Academy, KeepLevyTidy, Levenshulme Youth Forum, Friends of Highfield Park and Great Places. When we were leafleting it was interesting to see that when we introduced ourselves as Roma, at the beginning people were suspicious and didn't want to talk with us. But when we explained what we were doing people changed their opinion and praised us for the initiative and thanked us for helping out in keeping the area clean.

During the meetings with councillors we feel we created a strong bond with them. They are really interested in our community and in helping us improving both the image of the Roma and our relationships with other communities. We were pleased that they seemed willing to listen to our concerns about the presentation of safeguarding issues. We were really looking forward to discuss the problem with the Council officers. This is why we prepared our questions and sent them to Cllr. Richards almost three weeks before the meeting she organised. These were our questions:

- Which City Council committees have been discussing issues relating to the Roma community over the past year?
- Which committees have a continuing interest in the Roma community?
- Which sources of information on the Roma community do these committees rely on?
- How can the Roma community have input into this discussion on City Council committees?
- Where does the City Council see the main priorities for development and engagement in the Roma community?
- A page on the Roma community was included in the latest **State of the City Report** (Communities of Interest). It makes generalisations about early marriage and teenage pregnancy in the Roma community. Where did the Council get this information, and what measures were taken to ascertain its reliability and accuracy?
- The issue of early marriage and safeguarding figured prominently on the agenda of City Council committees over the past year.
 - Why does the City Council feel that this is a particular issue of the Roma community?
 - Where does the Council get its information on the subject?
- How can the Roma have more input to correct mistaken impressions that are being conveyed about their community? Specifically, the statements of concern are these:

Young People and Children Scrutiny Committee, 16 July 2013:

‘Members were concerned by the attitude of the GMP officers to some of the issues they had raised. These included treating the marriage of Roma children at 14 and female genital mutilation as “cultural” problems rather than crimes, and the acceptance of female looked after children (LAC) in “relationships” with men in their 30s. Members were very clear that these were safeguarding matters which GMP should be prioritising.’

Communities Scrutiny Committee, 13 November 2013:

‘the outreach process was very intensive and could take up to 4 times longer with members of the Roma community.. Members queried reports of girls from the Roma community getting married at 14 years old and whether this was considered to be forced marriage .. Some Members expressed concerns that sections of the Roma community were not law abiding. ... Decision: To request that the Young People and Children Scrutiny Committee investigate the issue of Roma girls missing from school’

Young People and Children Scrutiny Committee, 10 June 2014:

‘.. some Roma children were disappearing from the system during secondary education .. there was an issue, particularly with Roma girls disappearing after Year 9. .. Many Roma girls married as teenagers, sometimes before they were 16, and moved in with their husbands.’

Report to: Young People and Children Scrutiny Committee, 26 August 2014:

‘Roma Children To consider the challenges in safeguarding and supporting the attendance and attainment of Roma children Councillor S Newman TBC ‘

- Would it be possible to have some form of consultation with the Roma community before anything about them is officially published?
- When issues related to the Roma community arise, would it be possible to organize meetings with all actors currently working on/affected by the topic (community members, committees’ representatives, 3rd sector agencies, University of Manchester, etc.)?

When on December 1st 2014 we met the Councillors and officers in Town Hall we felt really proud and honoured to live in a city that treats all citizens equally and does not ignore Roma people. At the same time we are a bit disappointed that the questions we had submitted were not discussed at the meeting. These questions are important to our community and us because talking of Roma culture as dangerous for Roma girls is creating a bad image among our neighbours. However, we are happy that the attention we got from the Council has allowed us to begin an open conversation about these issues. We are glad that at the meeting we were offered the opportunity to provide more information about the Roma community at Council Committees that are interested about us. We are confident that we’ll have more opportunities to discuss the issues that we know are important for other Roma and us, and, when needed, come back to the questions that remained without answers. Looking forward, we wish to continue to work with the various initiatives that support Roma in the city. We are interested in particular in setting up a Roma community group. This will give us a chance to help our community directly, and to have Roma manage our own

advice and support service. It will also allow us to represent the interests of our community.

=====

Informal record of the meeting on Roma, Town Hall, 1 December 2014

This informal record is based on notes taken by Alex Robertson and Dr D. Viktor Leggio; it does not constitute a formal or approved set of Minutes from the meeting.

Present: Cllr Tracey Rawlins (Chair), Cllr Suzanne Richards, Cllr Bernard Stone, Cllr Nasrin Ali, Keiran Barnes (MCC, Equalities), Adam Farricker (MCC, Youth Services), Elaine Mills (MCC, Regeneration), Jenny Patterson (MCC, Children's Services), Ramona Constantin (University of Manchester), Mirela Steel (University of Manchester), Leo Tanase (University of Manchester), Daniel Moise, Nicolaus Tanase, Samuel Filipache, Alexandra Dutu, Mirabela Dutu, Dr Daniele Viktor Leggio (University of Manchester), Alex Robertson (University of Manchester).

Introductions

- At the request of Cllr Rawlins, the Roma Leadership Group introduces itself. Daniel, Nicolaus and Samuel explained Group's activities and link to the MigRom project. Ramona added that the Group also carried out the outreach work, including the weekly drop-in sessions.
- Cllr Rawlins asked for clarification on sponsorship by MigRom at University of Manchester, and what this entails. Viktor explained RLG is part of Consultation Forum that is a joint deliverable of UoM and MCC in the MigRom project, funded by the European Commission.

Purpose of the meeting

- Cllr Richards outlined her expectations of the meeting, acknowledged the question list sent in advance by the RLG (which raised concerns around information in past MCC documents such as the State of the City, Communities of Interest Report 2014, and issues around safeguarding and 'early marriage' interventions) but stated that she does not believe it is valuable to debate the past. Stressed the importance of keeping the meeting positive, and saw its purpose as improving engagement through starting better dialogue between MCC and Roma. Underlined that MCC welcome input from Roma in next Communities of Interest Report (to be published in 18 months time).
- Adam Farricker introduced Youth Council in Manchester, which provides mentor support and a voice to young people in the city. There is a monthly forum, in which he encouraged the RLG to participate.

Discussion on issue of data and sources of statements about the Roma community in MCC documents

- RLG enquired why prepared questions could not be discussed, and Cllr Richards again stated that "going forward" will provide the most productive discussion. Confirmed that MCC do not want to discuss past reports.

Indicated that the issues raised in the proposed questions had been already submitted to the council in Prof. Yaron Matras' commentary on BHA intervention and "dealt with at a higher level".² Adam Farricker acknowledged that past reports did not contain "a Roma voice", and stressed that future reports should, but again stated that it was not productive to discuss previous reports.

- Cllr Rawlins explained that none of the authors of the committee reports mentioned were at the meeting and so could not respond to their content. It was felt better to look at how we could move forward positively. Cllr Rawlins also suggested that she would look at her committee diary and let the group know when would be the best time to present something from the community to the committee.
- Daniel asked how Roma input worked and would work in future on a practical level e.g. if members of the RLG were unavailable or MCC decided not to contact them, what other sources would MCC use to get information on Roma?
- Ramona, speaking as a mother and member of the Roma community, explained that Roma community was hurt by reports containing inaccurate information, and it is hard to move forward, as proposed by Cllrs, without discussing these inaccuracies and knowing more about the relevant data sources. These reports are in the public domain, and may further trigger negative attitudes, stigmatisation and overt racism towards Roma people, which has a direct impact on the lives of Roma families, including children. Leo echoed these sentiments and suggested the discussion would only progress if these concerns were adequately addressed.
- Cllr Richards argued that she did not write the reports, so is not in the position to apologise for or make comment on them. Suggested that reports also contained similar remarks about other communities, and "Roma have not been singled out". Stressed MCC never wants to stereotype, and indicated quotes were taken out of context.
- Cllr Ali said some of the issues raised in the proposed question list are also relevant to the South Asian community. Cllr Ali also confirmed she did not believe it was beneficial to discuss these issues at the meeting, and the discussion should move forward.

Discussion around a report to correct inaccurate information

- RLG suggested a new report should be published, correcting any inaccurate or damaging information contained in previous publications especially around the issues of safeguarding and 'early marriage'.
- Adam Farricker advised that this may be best channelled through the Youth Council, and involvement in this would be the best strategy to move forward.
- Cllr Stone stated that sharing images on social media, spreading positive messages online and in the local community through the group's current activities is correcting any misconceptions and improving relations.

² *MigRom note:* We assume that the reference is to MigRom's evaluation of the BHA report on its intervention which was funded by Manchester City Council's Equalities Programme. The relevant documentation is accessible here:

<http://romani.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/migrom/docs/Evaluation.pdf>

Discussion of particular concerns around safeguarding

- Daniel raised the point that particular information around ‘early marriage’ has been put into the public domain and will require more specific correction than simply sharing positive images around the group’s litter-picking activity etc. Nicolaus added that there are different Roma groups and variation within the community, and that MCC documents make generalisations.
- Cllr Rawlins agreed awareness should be raised and suggested a “leaflet, or magazine piece” detailing variation within Roma community. Keiran Barnes indicated information on wider Roma community is needed.
- Viktor flagged that this information is already available, through the research of the MigRom Project (and Romani Project) at the University of Manchester.
- Cllr Ali asked whether representatives from different Roma communities could be involved in a meeting.
- Mirela explained that diverse groups were already represented at this meeting, but if MCC wants to invite more people, this can always be arranged.

Youth Council

- Meeting heard from Leon, a member of Manchester Youth Council, who explained its function.
- Leon invited RLG to next meeting of Youth Council Monday 8th December, 5.30-7.30pm, room 137 at Town Hall.

Conclusions and further action

- RLG asked if Cllrs wanted to know anything about the Roma community, or wanted to ask any questions.
- Cllr Rawlins suggested that many Cllrs are interested in finding out more about Roma community. Nicolaus invited those present to ask questions, but no questions were posed.
- Keiran Barnes stated that engagement and discussion need to happen before the publication of any Council reports. He felt that stronger bonds are needed and MCC has a lot to learn about Roma community. He suggested an interim report could be useful for the Communities Scrutiny Committee, before next Communities of Interest report.
- Adam Farricker will keep RLG updated about Youth Council. Suggested Youth Engagement funding was available through Youth Council for activities, not staff.
- Cllr Rawlins will invite RLG to relevant Community Scrutiny Committee meetings over next year, and invited RLG to identify next 1 or 2 projects that they want to work on, and discuss in further meetings. Cllr Rawlins will contact RLG through Viktor initially.
- Cllr Richards invited Ramona to ward co-ordination meetings in Longsight, attended by schools, residents groups, Big Life, among others. Anyone from Roma community would be welcome to attend.
- Cllr Stone flagged Gorton Events a discussion group around upcoming events in Gorton. RLG can contact Cllr Stone for more information on time and dates.

- Cllr Ali suggested RLG particularly Daniel could be instrumental in 'reviving' Levenshulme Community Association. This group has Saturday meetings at 2pm.

=====

MigRom ('The immigration of Romanian Roma to Western Europe: Causes, effects and future engagement strategies') is funded by the European Union under the 7th Framework Programme call on 'Dealing with diversity and cohesion: the case of the Roma in the European Union' (GA319901). MigRom is approved and monitored by the University of Manchester's Committee on the Ethics of Research on Human Beings (Project Ref. 12412) and by the Ethical Review in FP7 Protocol (Proposal ID 319901)

Project Manager: Charlotte Jones / Alex Robertson
Project Coordinator: Prof Yaron Matras
Research Associate: Dr D. Viktor Leggio
Contact: romani@manchester.ac.uk, +44 (0)161 275 5999

<http://romani.humanities.manchester.ac.uk/migrom>