



Statement by Professor Yaron Matras
(Coordinator, MigRom project, The University of Manchester)
Re. 'Roma Engagement and Reporting Opportunities'
Manchester City Council Communities Scrutiny Committee, 24 June 2015

I congratulate the City Council on its report on 'Roma Engagement'. Roma continue to be Europe's most vulnerable and marginalised minority. Not many major cities are able to show such impressive track record of engagement to protect Roma from negative perception and to ensure their equality. This report is therefore not just a milestone in Manchester's engagement with Roma, but also a model for other cities. My research team and I at the University of Manchester are proud and honoured to have made a contribution to this report and to the Council's engagement with the Romani community over the past few years. We are committed to continue to work in partnership with the Council on these issues.

Our team was first approached by the City Council six years ago and asked to advise on the Romani community, its needs and its aspirations. We were also asked to draft an engagement strategy. This has since been guiding key aspects of the Council's approach to the Romani community. In 2013 we formalised a partnership with the Council as part of the MigRom project. The full title of the project is: "The immigration of Romanian Roma into Western Europe: Causes, effects, and future engagement strategies". As the title suggests, the project aims to better understand what motivates Roma to settle in Manchester, the structure of the community, and the circumstances of their life here. It also aims to assess the effectiveness of interventions, and to propose improvements where necessary. It is on these future engagement strategies that I would like to focus today:

We are working toward two goals: First, to help overcome any remaining barriers to participation, so that Roma can make use of the many opportunities that the city has to offer. Second, to help create structures that will allow the Romani community to reduce its reliance on targeted external interventions, and to be able to formulate and articulate its own needs and interests.

There have been three principal factors that have acted as potential barriers to participation:

The first are language barriers and difficulties in navigating the formal procedures of institutions and agencies. As with every emerging community, such difficulties tend to be temporary and transitional. They are overcome as migrants adjust and a young generation grows up that is more familiar with both language and local customs. To alleviate difficulties in the short term, we have been offering support to the community in the form of an advice and consultation service. The service is led by members of the Romani community. It is responsive to the needs of clients (not assertive), it is punctual (i.e. single-issue oriented, not holistic), and it is client-centred, not agency-centred, and in that way non-intrusive and more effective. Relying on the

delivery through community members, the service has made a significant contribution to developing advice and support capacity within the community. It will now be run in partnership with the new community group, Roma Voices of Manchester, with a view toward gradually transferring the responsibility for leading the service to the group.

The second principal obstacle to participation was the restrictions on the employment rights of A2 nationals. These restrictions were removed in January 2014. We have since seen a surge of interest in training as well as successful job applications. This indicates that Roma are aware of new opportunities and determined to make use of them. It also shows that Roma in Manchester face little if any discrimination on the job market.

The third barrier to participation is negative perceptions. In the past we have witnessed wholesale allegations of crime, anti-social behaviour, and truancy against the Romani community. The Council's engagement has been instrumental in refuting these allegations and confronting negative perceptions. As a result, we no longer witness tensions and Roma generally feel safe and accepted both by their neighbours and by local agencies. However, we still encounter occasional misconceptions in particular around Romani family values. The tight-knit structure of the community and strong family ties are often misinterpreted. Some people entertain a misguided belief that Romani culture encourages early marriage or disengagement from education and other public services. Such notions are harmful because they risk lowering teachers' aspirations of Romani pupils in schools, and they risk creating unnecessary suspicions among health care professionals and social workers. It is important that we avoid blaming any case-specific issues on culture, and that we avoid generalisations. We have offered our input to local service providers and to the Council in order to help clarify family values and the precise role that they play in the Romani community. We continue to be at the disposal of agencies and services for such training, which are happy to provide as part of the project's outreach activities. We also hope that the new community group, Roma Voices of Manchester, will be able to play a key role in informing about their own community in the future.

The formation of the Roma community group is therefore a significant milestone. We are very pleased that the Council has recognised this in its report as an important opportunity and a channel through which to communicate with the Romani community.

We will continue our efforts to support the process. Our engagement derives directly from the University of Manchester's main goals: to play a lead role in research and in training and capacity building, and to pursue a social responsibility agenda. We will continue to provide an evidence-based assessment of participation patterns and interventions. We will continue to offer training to practitioners, to improve their understanding of the Romani community. And we will continue our efforts to help members of the Romani community to acquire the tools that they need in order to articulate their community's needs and to provide others with information about their community. To this end, we look forward to continuing our work in partnership with the Council.