
policy and practice

Shaping policy and practice through co-production: MigRom engagement with Romanian Roma and the 'Manchester Model'

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Introduction

In this paper we describe the policy outcomes of a collaborative project involving a research team from the University of Manchester and Manchester City Council, around engagement with the local community of Romanian Roma migrants. Romanian Roma are one of the groups of immigrants from eastern Europe who already began to relocate to the UK in the early 2000s, with numbers increasing after Romania joined the EU in 2007. The settlement of several large families in close proximity to one another in a district in southern Manchester attracted attention from local residents and public service providers in 2008–2009. In the summer of 2009 the Council invited the Romani Project at the University of Manchester to provide an assessment of the background, needs and aspirations of this small community and to propose an engagement strategy, key elements of which were then implemented by the Council in partnership with other organisations. Progress was then monitored and assessed as part of a four-year project funded by the European Commission's Seventh Framework Research Programme ('MigRom – The immigration of Romanian Roma to Western Europe: Causes, effects and future engagement strategies'). The paper draws in part on the authors' previous contributions to the *Report on MigRom Engagement Strategy and its alignment to Manchester City priorities* (Manchester City Council, 2016) and to the chapter on 'Community identity and mobilisation: Roma migrant experiences in Manchester' (Matras and Leggio, 2017).

The research leading to the present publication results from MigRom, 'The immigration of Romanian Roma to Western Europe: Causes, effects and future engagement strategies', a project funded by the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme under the call on 'Dealing with diversity and cohesion: The case of the Roma in the European Union' (GA319901).

The emergence of Manchester's Roma Strategy

Manchester City Council's active engagement with Roma families was established in 2007, with the Council's International New Arrivals, Travellers and Supplementary Schools Team (INA/T/SS) working with the Roma community through schools enrolment. In spring 2009, in order to address reported issues of community cohesion and service provision in Gorton South, the Council set up a Gorton South Roma Strategy Group to improve coordination and engagement with the community. In August 2009, the Council commissioned the Romani Project at the University of Manchester to carry out research in the Romani community of Gorton South. The project was asked to assess the aspirations of community members, their level of skills, their concerns and potential channels of engagement, and to make recommendations for an engagement strategy. The outcomes of this research were presented to Council officers in October 2009 (see Matras et al, 2009). They indicated that the community of Romanian Roma in the area consisted of around 300–400 individuals, the majority of them children, who originated mainly from Țândărei in southeastern Romania. Most were related through family ties, and many adhered to the Pentecostal faith (it should be noted that the community has since grown to include unrelated families of Romanian Roma from other cities in Romania and of other faiths, while there was also a move of a significant number of Romanian Roma families based in the area away from Manchester in 2012). Families expressed a keen interest in their children attending school but described obstacles such as a shortage of school places and inaccessibility of the registration process. Families also expressed an interest in finding employment, although regulations at the time restricted them to self-employment (these restrictions were removed in January 2014 and there has since been a significant increase in employment in the community).

Based on these findings, the University of Manchester made a number of recommendations to the Council: to create two temporary positions for Roma outreach workers to support interaction with local services, to support capacity building by training young people from the community to create role models, to draw on this capacity to engage Roma classroom assistants to support Roma pupils in local schools, to raise awareness of the Roma community among local services and schools through a series of training activities, and to strengthen provisions for school places and ensure equal access to education. The Council responded to these recommendations with the development of the Roma Strategy 2011–14. With support from the charitable organisation The Big Life Group and the University of Manchester, a training programme for young Roma was introduced. The trainees were then engaged on a part-time basis to provide classroom support and parent liaison in a number of schools with a high number of Roma pupils. As part of the delivery of the Migrant Impact Fund (a £500,000 award funded via Government Office North West), two temporary outreach worker positions were set up with another charitable organisation, the Black Health Agency for Equality (Matras et al, 2015), with a special remit to address issues of the local Roma community. Measures were taken to ensure equal access to school places and to counteract negative perceptions of Roma by local residents (such as allegations of organised crime and human trafficking, which were found to be baseless) through regular neighbourhood meetings.

The MigRom project

Drawing on the collaboration that was established in 2009, the Romani Project at the University of Manchester applied successfully in 2012 to an open call for research bids on the theme 'Dealing with diversity and cohesion: The case of the Roma in the European Union' issued by the European Commission's Seventh Framework research programme. Led by the University of Manchester, the research consortium included academic partners based in Romania, Italy, France and Spain, as well as the non-academic partners Manchester City Council and the European Roma and Travellers Forum, an umbrella organisation of Roma NGOs with consultative status at the Council of Europe. The aim of the research project was to carry out a comparative ethnography of Roma migrations, examining the conditions of Romanian Roma migrants in four Western European destination countries taking into account a longitudinal development trajectory, as well as to examine the triggers for migration and its impact on the origin communities in Romania. The participation of non-academic partners would allow the project to benefit from the input of Roma representatives and a local authority into the design and dissemination of the research, and to pilot new models of intervention at local level and assess their success in order to identify criteria for good practice.

Alongside the project's research component, a budget of around €250,000 was allocated by the consortium specifically for outreach work within the community of Romanian Roma migrants in Manchester. This enabled the project to engage two members of the local Roma community as outreach workers on a full-time basis. The outreach work was managed by the University of Manchester in partnership with the Council's Regeneration Team and Equality Team and other stakeholders through a joint Steering Group.

In the absence of a scripted outreach strategy, the team decided to introduce weekly 'drop-in' consultation sessions for Roma that would be run by the Roma outreach workers. The sessions gradually developed into a new type of intervention: led by Roma, they were strictly responsive to the needs of clients and explicitly non-intrusive, and were therefore preferred to the established format in which non-Roma case workers would visit homes and carry out surveys that were often perceived as invasive. The drop-in session followed university research ethics protocols on data protection. The team did not record or share clients' personal data, but notes were taken which enabled the team to issue periodical assessments of needs and trends, such as access to employment.

This enabled the project to produce a range of research reports and guidance notes outlining the prevailing trends and issues in Manchester's Roma communities. These documents became a valuable resource to the Council in the development of its Roma-related activity and were shared with Council officers to inform future planning. They covered aspects of employment aspirations, marriage and partnership and birth rates in the Roma community, engagement in education, language barriers and access to healthcare, and more. The project's academics and Roma outreach workers also offered training sessions to public services in Manchester and beyond. In 2014 the project was invited to roll out the drop-in consultation setup to nearby Oldham in Greater Manchester, and to advise Bradford City Council on the shaping of its engagement strategy with Roma migrants.

The MigRom project's weekly Roma-led drop-in sessions soon became a fixture in the local Romanian Roma community. Operating from a local community centre in South Manchester (Sure Start), it attracted Romanian Roma migrants from across the Greater Manchester area. The scheme adopted an explicit policy of 'self-reliance', with the outreach workers encouraging clients to acquire skills to interact directly with local service providers. It took the view that in the longer term the community should release itself from its dependency on targeted advice and support services. In the short term, the public message was that Roma were able to provide advice and support to their own community, and that external interventions should give priority to the building of capacity within the community itself.

A voice for the community

The service and its delivery also became the initial engagement capital of a small group of emerging Roma spokespersons – those employed by the University of Manchester as outreach workers and a number of their associates who had taken on roles as youth workers and classroom support staff. It allowed them to build their reputation within the community and their relations with surrounding actors such as the Council and the service providers with whom they interacted regularly on their clients' behalf.

Part of the MigRom Project's schedule of deliverables was the Roma Consultation Forum. The project application submitted to the European Commission in 2012 contained 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.

The project's ambition to contribute directly to the creation of lasting structures was linked to the pilot research carried out in 2009 (Matras et al, 2009). That report argued that Roma arrived to seek in principle the same goals as other population groups, and so they can and should fall under the same protocols of needs assessment and access to service as other populations. By 2013, this narrative was adopted in the City Council's Roma Strategy report, which put 'mainstreaming' at the top of its engagement agenda with Roma (Mills and Wilson, 2013). A direct link was thus established between inclusion, mainstreaming, and the creation of sustainable structures to enable direct dialogue between the local authority and the Romani community.

In June 2013 it was agreed that setting up the Consultation Forum would proceed initially by identifying individuals with an interest in acting as informal spokespersons for the community, and through gradually building their capacity. This process, which included training events, film screenings and meetings with representatives

of international Romani culture initiatives and with elected members and council officers, resulted in a consolidated group that gradually gained collective experience in engaging with local stakeholders around identifying and articulating the needs and interests of their community. The group was informally labelled 'Roma Leadership Group' and worked closely with the MigRom team of researchers.

One of the group's aims was to actively seek to counteract negative images. In November 2014 they launched a series of public 'litter-picking' events, in which young Roma called on their neighbours of various backgrounds to join them on a Saturday morning to clean the streets. The symbolism was intended to confront the prejudice articulated by some residents and media that Roma were to blame for littering. It also aimed at raising awareness of Roma and offering Roma an opportunity to show that they are willing and able to play a key role in improving community relations. The activity received logistic support from local community organisations and schools, who contributed equipment. The university helped the group produce leaflets for the event, with instructions, accompanied by images, on waste disposal in several community languages including Romani (the leaflet was later adopted by the Council for wider distribution). Local Elected Councillors joined the activity, which, following an official University of Manchester press release, received coverage in the local press under the heading 'Roma youngsters clean up streets in attempt to sweep away prejudice'. Members of the group were cited in the article as saying: 'We want to show that Roma are not different from other people.'

Working with the MigRom research team, the Roma Leadership Group also became aware of the depiction of Roma in various documents and publications, including some of those produced by the Council, such as educational material co-sponsored by the Black Health Agency for Equality and the Council's International New Arrivals Team, and statements from these organisations and officials cited in the minutes of some Council committee meetings as well as in the Council's 2014 report *The State of the City – Communities of Interest* (Manchester City Council, 2014). Some statements contained generalisations on Roma family structures and cultural practices which the Roma Leadership Group found to be inaccurate and problematic, particularly generalisations on 'early marriage' and alleged lack of interest in education and lack of aspirations among the Roma community. The Roma Leadership Group approached elected councillors to try and clarify what it saw as misconceptions and misrepresentations of its community. It was then decided to hold a meeting with Council officers and elected members to discuss these matters. At the meeting on 2 December 2014, the suggestion was presented by Council officers that the Roma Leadership Group should have an active role in contributing directly to future Council documents.

In the following months, the group branded itself publicly as 'Roma Voices of Manchester' (RVoM). The development of this initiative was supported through the MigRom Steering Group with input from the Council, the University of Manchester and other member organisations, in partnership with the Big Life Group and with additional support from the European Roma and Travellers Forum. With support from the MigRom project, it set up a social media presence, began a process of drafting statutes in preparation of formal registration as a Community Interest Group (an officially registered charitable organisation), hired venues for public events and used the university's media relations apparatus to publicise them. In June 2015, Manchester City Council released a report (Manchester City Council, 2015) in which it recognised

RVoM as a channel for direct dialogue with the Roma community and declared that it would be careful not to draw on ‘unsubstantiated information’ in the future. The ensuing dialogue was seen as mutually beneficial: RVoM received guidance and support from the Council to develop its work planning and funding options, including signposting to small grant opportunities. The group was instrumental in improving the representation of Roma people in the Council’s updated 2016 Communities of Interest report, providing information about its activities and aims and raising awareness of some of the highest priorities for Roma people in Manchester from their own perspective. RVoM continued to keep the Council’s Equality Team regularly updated on its activities and developments and, as such, it helped the team to build its knowledge of Roma communities and priorities in Manchester. It maintained a consistent dialogue with other key public and voluntary sector stakeholders to raise the group’s profile and strengthen its position in the community and in the city.

The premise of MigRom’s support in the development and capacity building of the RVoM group mirrored this strategic approach. The project sought to enable the RVoM group to promote the integration and independence of Roma communities by providing community advocacy and support, thereby reducing people’s reliance on public services that are being delivered through diminishing budgets. The MigRom Project team was very clear that its various investments (financial, resource and personnel) in the RVoM group’s formation and capacity building would expire at the end of the project in March 2017, and that the group would need to be able to operate independently of the project at that stage. The aftermath of the EU Referendum in June 2017 brought considerable insecurity to the local community of Roma migrants, with a number of families deciding to leave the UK and to return to Romania, among them some of the RVoM founding members. Among those who have stayed, some continue to be active in various networking activities. At the time of writing, a core group consisting of the Directors of RVoM continues to meet and has held occasional events such as a Christmas activity afternoon for children in 2017, face to face briefings with key public services and networking with other community groups. The impact that Brexit will have on the stability of the community and thus on the role that RVoM will continue to have is of course difficult to assess at this stage. The group has not been successful in obtaining funding, but on the other hand its Directors have expressed a preference to engage in ad hoc activities rather than establish themselves as semi-professional activists drawing a salary or even a regular expenses allowance from the organisation. This can be regarded as a fresh approach to community activism: whatever the extent of its public visibility as an organisation, the principles and routines of self-organisation and public voicing of community interests are now part of the community’s collective experience and resilience capital and have contributed to shaping a new image of the Roma among their neighbours as well as among public services (see Matras and Leggio, 2017).

MigRom and Manchester’s strategic priorities

One of the Council’s key equality objectives is to work together with Manchester’s citizens and partners in the public and voluntary sectors to increase the quality of the information, knowledge and understanding about Manchester’s diverse communities. The MigRom project and RVoM have supported progress on this objective with work including developing a range of broad data sets on the Roma population of

Manchester, including qualitative and occasional quantitative data sets outlining the size and distribution of the Roma population as well as the particular issues, trends and opportunities that affect the community; developing targeted data on specific Roma groups, such as Roma pupils in Manchester schools, which have increased the Council's awareness of notable issues and trends that affect the children's educational experience and attainment; producing fact sheets to clarify the cultural and social misconceptions about Roma people, which have been useful tools for Council officers working directly with communities and commissioning officers when developing service specifications; and organising and facilitating conferences and workshops to raise awareness of key stakeholders locally, nationally and internationally, of Manchester's Roma population and the lessons that can be learned from the 'Manchester model'. It also supported the accuracy and integrity of the Council's reporting of Roma issues by providing case studies and supplementary texts to aid Council officers.

Using its international connections, the MigRom Project was able to promote its work and the successes and lessons learned in Manchester and to raise awareness of the 'Manchester model' across Europe, organising and facilitating conferences and workshops to celebrate Roma integration and arranging press releases, newspaper, television and radio coverage and a social media campaign to promote RVOM to a wide audience.

The Council's 'Our Manchester Strategy 2015–2025' presents a vision for Manchester that calls for a strong sense of citizenship and pride in the city, new jobs and improved school results, and improved health and wellbeing. One of the strategy's declared pillars is the aim to be a progressive and equitable city. This declaration of aims allowed the MigRom project to link its own policy impact agenda, as described above, with the Council's articulated objectives. The Council, in turn, has been able to present its involvement in MigRom's work as critical to ensuring that Roma residents are included in its declared aims, by raising awareness of their presence and contribution potential, and by motivating members of the community to become pro-active in formulating and articulating their community's needs and interests.

Conclusion

The 'Manchester Model' of engagement with Roma migrants offered a novel and innovative way to manage the transition from the state in which a new, emerging community in the city was initially misunderstood, to the emergence of direct dialogue with that community, and consequently the inclusion of the community in the Council's mainstream strategy for achieving its objectives. The concerns raised around the arrival of Roma in 2009, and the fact that in many ways they reflected universal pre-conceptions of Roma and the suspicion with which Roma migrants are encountered across Western Europe, meant that the implementation of the Romani Project's engagement recommendations from 2009 was not a matter of course. Yet Manchester City Council embraced those recommendations since they aligned themselves with its overall strategy to achieve equality and community cohesion, and with its operational strategy to work closely with partner organisations and civic society institutions to help deliver its objectives. The Gorton South Roma Strategy Group had set milestones to counteract negative perception while ensuring that community had access to services. These were informed by the Council's ambition to support people into employment and thereby release them from dependency on

income support and other benefits. In respect of the Romanian Roma, for whom restrictions on employment rights applied until January 2014, the Council had a special interest in setting up structures that would support the transition from part-time self-employment to a range of employment opportunities. MigRom's outreach work offered an opportunity to prevent dependency by collecting data on needs and disseminating information on job and training opportunities and raising aspirations in particular among the younger generation. The public sector reform measures of 2011 (also known as 'austerity') strengthened the need to enable self-reliance, as fewer resources were available. The Council therefore welcomed the opportunity to bring in external funding to support a bespoke intervention.

Around the same time, the University of Manchester launched its Social Responsibility agenda, which aimed at promoting research with impact that would make a positive difference to society, and to use knowledge and resources for the benefit of the local community. The new agenda was a response to the introduction, ahead of the national Research Excellence Framework 2014, of 'impact on society' – defined as the demonstrable effect of research on changing practices and policies – as a measure of research excellence. The university therefore encouraged opportunities to partner with non-academic stakeholders and to have direct input into the shaping of policy and practice. This allowed MigRom to recruit and manage two non-academic outreach worker positions, to devote resources to the formation and promotion of a Roma community group and to deliver training and consultancy to public services.

The integration of Roma migrants from Eastern Europe has been flagged as a key policy challenge by local authorities across Europe over the past decade, and has received considerable attention from the European political institutions. This has to do as much with the particular family networking profile and social and human capital of Roma migrants themselves as with deeply entrenched negative pre-conceptions of Roma and a frequent tendency to scapegoating, as widely acknowledged in European policy documents. MigRom offered an innovative approach to engagement with Roma migrants in Manchester, by aligning the existing strategic priorities of two partner institutions, the University of Manchester and Manchester City Council, and by drawing on existing research expertise, international contacts, and the opportunity to draw on resources provided by European institutions as part of an EU strategic priority given to Roma inclusion since 2011.

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