

# Local engagement for Roma inclusion

## Locality study Medway (United Kingdom), 2016

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## Contents

1. Executive summary .....	3
2. Introduction .....	3
3. Description of the local context.....	6
4. PAR methodology employed .....	7
5. The local intervention description.....	9
Key interventions in the locality.....	9
Resources used to implement the interventions.....	12
Stakeholders and partners involved .....	13
6. Analysis, discussion, lessons learned .....	16
7. Conclusions and recommendations.....	19
8. Additional Information .....	20

## 1. Executive summary

Medway is home to a sizeable community of Roma migrants, originating largely from the Czech Republic and Slovakia. The main barriers to their full inclusion in society include low levels of English language competency, limited awareness, understanding of and interaction with public and statutory services, and a lack of community spokespersons. Limited language skills consequently exacerbate problems of access to housing, employment, and general social inclusion.

In order to address these challenges, the LERI local research in Medway focused on developing a series of interventions to support Roma inclusion, namely: inclusion through language by providing functional and practical English language classes for adults; family-based learning models which provided classes and activities for children running in parallel to adult language courses; extra academic support for high school pupils through a community homework club; and community engagement and empowerment events with representatives of public agencies together with the local community. The LERI local interventions were developed after extensive consultation with local Roma and EU citizens residing in Medway, local officials and professionals whose work brought them into contact with Roma and other EU citizens. This case study shows that using participatory approaches to design and implement local interventions in Medway has led to various positive outcomes, including community building, increased language skills and confidence, greater understanding of UK society and how key public organisations operate and how to access them.

### **Keywords/Tags:**

Spokespeople, language classes, family learning models, EU migrant Roma

## 2. Introduction

In the UK context 'Roma' generally refers to EU citizens of Romani background from Eastern and Central Europe. Gypsies (or Romanichal/Romanies) residing in the UK, and Travellers (or Irish Travellers) by contrast, refers to those nomadic or formerly nomadic groups who are either indigenous to the UK or who have been resident in the country for several centuries (the first report of 'Roma' arriving from continental Europe was in 1505 in Scotland). This is the usage adopted throughout this report. The group included in the LERI research was Roma and migrants from other EU member states.

In the Medway region of Kent, South East England the main barriers to Roma inclusion are as follows. The key barrier is insufficient language skills. This was identified by local community members and other stakeholders during consultations as the most basic barrier since it exacerbates many of the other barriers faced by the Roma e.g. low levels of engagement with public services, substandard and overcrowded housing, low employment levels, low wages, insecure work, poor job prospects and a lack of interaction with other sections of the community. The latter was especially the case for the adults who display lower levels of interaction with people outside of their own communities than

their children, who are generally more socially integrated through attending school and their better command of the English language.

During the initial phases of the LERI research, a participatory needs assessment was carried out, during which it became clear that the ability to attend adult English classes was not straightforward, despite Roma participants expressing a high level of interest in improving their English. The expressed need for adults was classes focusing on functional and practical English. Consultation with local community members indicated that childcare was a significant obstacle to English class attendance for many of the women. The second key barrier, which largely stems from the first, is low levels of engagement with statutory and public services, meaning that there are high levels of unmet needs within the community. While language ability was generally the main cause for this, in many cases poor language skills were compounded by a lack of understanding of how different public and statutory agencies operate; what their roles and functions are or how to access and engage with them. Another barrier to integration was the lack of any social organisation or community spokespeople. The lack of a conduit for communication between external organisations and local Roma people combined with little social interaction with other people was highlighted in the preparatory phase of the LERI research as contributing to the poor knowledge of available services and low levels of engagement with them. Therefore the key barriers hindering social integration were closely interrelated and tended to reinforce each other. The approach developed was designed to tackle the root cause (poor language) of exclusion while providing the foundations of increased engagement and dialogue with the wider community. Another barrier impacting on the integration of Roma, as well as other EU and non-EU migrants is the wider political context at both local and national levels. In this context EU migrants (including Roma) have the right to move to and settle in the UK while non-EU migrants require various admission requirements to enter depending on their personal circumstances and reasons for wishing to come to the UK. At the municipal level the impact of austerity measures and severe reductions in public expenditure implemented by the Government have led to significant funding cuts, job losses and a scaling back of many activities and programmes focusing on social and neighbourhood regeneration that the local authority previously implemented. This will have a direct impact as the local authority will not be applying for any further EU structural funds for migrant inclusion. Since the departure of the previous migrant inclusion coordinator in 2014 the local authority has not replaced the post meaning that migrants are often lost and present themselves at the local authority asking where they can go for general enquiries. As nobody is available at the local authority they need to seek alternative sources of advice through local charities and community organisations. Furthermore cuts to social and community regeneration programmes will also impact on Roma and other migrants since they tend to live in the poorer neighbourhoods where many of these interventions were focused. A recent yet important factor is the outcome of the EU referendum result in June 2016. The UK Government announced on 11 July 2016 that the status of EU migrants living and working in the UK has not changed and will not change in the near future. It continued that once the UK officially leaves the legal status of EU

nationals residing in the UK will be properly protected.<sup>1</sup> Despite these assurances the outcome for EU citizens resident in the UK is subject to negotiations that are yet to take place, creating anxiety and insecurity among many EU citizens in the UK.<sup>2</sup> Moreover the climate has been increasingly hostile to migrants in recent months, with a rise in racist incidents following the referendum though this appears to have subsided more recently.<sup>3</sup> Economic uncertainty and the availability of EU, national and local funds to promote migrant integration and inclusion in the future may impact on Roma and other A2 and A8 migrants.

Given the void created by the local authority's reduced role in social regeneration and migrant inclusion programmes one of the main local drivers of Roma and migrant inclusion is the work of voluntary and community organisations such as Medway Plus. The organisation has extensive expertise of working with local communities and works with a wide network of other organisations in the public sector (e.g health and social services, police) social housing landlords and with other voluntary and charitable organisations. At a regional level Medway Plus is part of a recently formed group called the Kent Roma Interest Group (KRIG) with representatives from other areas of Kent with high Roma populations (Gravesham, Shepway and Thanet). The LERI local interventions were developed after extensive consultation with local Roma and EU migrants, local officials and professionals whose work brought them into contact with Roma and other EU migrants. They were therefore well placed to know what the key issues facing these communities were and allowed for triangulation of findings. The interventions were:

- i. *Inclusion through language*: functional and practical English for adults.
- ii. *Family Based Learning*: classes and activities for children running simultaneously with intervention (i).
- iii. *Homework Club/Community Cohesion*: extra academic support for high school pupils of all nationalities based on need.
- iv. *Integration through dialogue*: community empowerment events with representatives of public and statutory agencies.
- v. *Community engagement events*: social events designed to bring different sections of the local community together.

Evaluation indicates that the interventions were successful in galvanising the community through the formation of the Czechoslovak Association, which will ensure a durable positive impact; increasing language skills and confidence (albeit within the limits of what could feasibly be achieved) and understanding of UK society; how key public organisations operate, their rules and regulations and how and when to access them. LERI's project results are demonstrating sustainability in other ways too. The Kent Roma Interest Group (KRIG) has recently submitted a bid to the Big Lottery to conduct a Kent-wide Roma inclusion project that will adopt the same methodological approach as LERI. The

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<sup>1</sup> Gov. UK 'The status of EU Nationals in the UK July 11<sup>th</sup> 2016' available at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/statement-the-status-of-eu-nationals-in-the-uk>

<sup>2</sup> The Guardian 'Future of EU nationals more uncertain after May comments' 4<sup>th</sup> July 2016, available at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jul/04/future-of-eu-nationals-in-uk-uncertain-may-comments-tory-leadership-brexite>

<sup>3</sup> Institute of Race Relations 'Post-Brexit Racism' July 7<sup>th</sup> 2016 available at: <http://www.irr.org.uk/news/post-brexit-racism/>

project will have the involvement of Medway Plus, build on the lessons learned during the LERI project and implement elements of best practice that LERI developed. Further drivers of local inclusion have been instigated by the LERI interventions particularly through the formation of the Medway Czechoslovak Association (CA) by local Roma and non Roma Czech and Slovak residents. One Roma member of the CA has joined the Medway Youth Parliament to represent Roma and non Roma Czech and Slovak residents. Additionally, communication channels between the LERI and representatives of public and statutory organisations have been established as part of the community empowerment and engagement activities. These will enhance mutual understanding between LERI participants and local officials and service providers, promoting social cohesion and the sustainability of LERI.

### 3. Description of the local context

Medway is a unitary authority in Kent, South-East England which is approximately 50 km from London. It has a population of 264,000 making it the largest urban area in the South-East outside of London. Historically Medway was associated with the Chatham Dockyard and a significant proportion of its population was employed in shipbuilding and associated industries. Closure of the dockyard in the 1980s led to high levels of unemployment and a decline in the area's fortunes. Although it has recovered somewhat there are still areas of high deprivation in the area with eight neighbourhoods among the most deprived 10% in the country. Two of those neighbourhoods are in the Luton neighbourhood of Chatham where many of the LERI participants live.<sup>4</sup> Recent years have also witnessed a rise in the proportion of the population born outside of the UK and increasing ethnic diversity in the area, with 11% of Medway residents born outside the UK. A large proportion of that rise has been among the 'Other White' category (largely EU migrants) between 2001 and 2011.<sup>5</sup> Kent has the highest number of Gypsies/Travellers in the UK and Medway has approximately 1500 largely in housing where there are several extended family networks in the area. There is one local authority run camp site in Medway which contains 11 plots occupied by 10 families in addition to occasional unauthorised encampments by those passing through the area.<sup>6</sup>

Medway – and Chatham in particular – has received a substantial number of EU mobile citizen Roma, largely from the Czech Republic and Slovakia in recent years. It is this population that LERI focused on and the barriers identified related to this group, not to Gypsies/Travellers who, despite being similarly marginalised, often faced different barriers and issues around social integration. No official figures exist for the population of Czech/Slovak Roma exist, though some officials estimate a local population of 3-4,000 with many living in the Luton and St Mary neighbourhoods of Chatham. Overcrowding is a particular problem. The area has been subject to housing regeneration efforts through the EU funded URBACT programme previously in addition to EU funded projects to

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<sup>4</sup>Medway Council 'Delivering Fair and Responsive Services' available at:

<http://www.medway.gov.uk/pdf/Fair%20and%20Responsive%20Services%202012.pdf>

<sup>5</sup>2011 key statistics – Medway summary January 2013 available at:

<http://www.medway.gov.uk/pdf/2011%20Census%20Key%20Statistics%20Jan13.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Interview, local authority officer 11<sup>th</sup> January 2014.

promote migrant integration such as AIMER and AGIR.<sup>7</sup> Interviews with local officials indicated that engagement with statutory services is often low though local schools have made determined efforts to engage Roma pupils and families and employ dedicated EAL (English as an Additional Language) and support workers. Medway Council has previously run EU funded migrant integration programmes such as AIMER and AGIR and a number of mainstream policies for addressing wider inequalities are in place. There is also a significant amount of ad hoc work being carried out at the community level by public agencies, voluntary sector, charitable and faith based organisations.

The main stakeholders in LERI were Dr. David Smith of the University of Greenwich as the field expert, the Victory Academy School and Medway Plus with other stakeholders including representatives from local authority departments (education, social services and housing) and Medway Police. Monika Oravcova was the local LERI project manager for Medway. She is employed at Victoria Academy as a dedicated Liaison Officer funded by the local authority and works closely with the families of Roma and other A2 and A8 migrant pupils. Medway Plus is a community based registered charity and was founded in May 2015 by ex-Medway Council employees. The charity has considerable experience working with socially and economically deprived residents and coordinated and administered LERI with the help of Peter Voegel and Marie Thibault.

#### 4. PAR methodology employed

The main needs identified were centred on education: in particular the need for adult language classes with a focus on developing practical English skills, the lack of which was identified as *the* key obstacle to greater integration. It was recognised that a learning strategy that would encompass family and community wide dimensions was needed to make participation more possible and the LERI interventions more inclusive. Community engagement and empowerment activities for adults of local Roma and non Roma migrants were conducted to increase knowledge of local service providers and build the confidence to engage with them. Language and communication activities for children in their 'home' (i.e. their parents') language was identified as a barrier to effective communication within many families, and shaped the content and structure of the Saturday children's group. Additional classes for high school pupils who were identified as being of greatest need were developed in line with need. The participatory action research (PAR) methods were developed after extensive consultation, which included telephone and face to face interviews with local authority officials, personnel from the Victory Academy and community workers with knowledge of the local area and the different communities within it. These interviews focused on their experiences working with Roma in the area; knowledge of this community; what they considered the main barriers to integration to be; what interventions if any were in place and to elicit information on further contacts who it may be useful to speak to. This was a successful method through which the local LERI team was later formed. PAR methods included a series of focus group discussions that were held at the Victoria Academy School with Roma adults and teenagers attending the school. Questions centred around their reasons for coming to the UK; perceptions and experiences

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<sup>7</sup> URBACT EU available at: [http://urbact.eu/uploads/tx\\_projectsresultsdocuments/SUITE\\_SYNTHESIS\\_LAPS.pdf](http://urbact.eu/uploads/tx_projectsresultsdocuments/SUITE_SYNTHESIS_LAPS.pdf)

of the local area and what they considered to be the main issues facing their community to be. Having established the main issues through dialogue the next stage of the discussion was what interventions could address them. It was already known through interviews with local authority officials and community workers that engagement and attendance at adult classes was low and dropout rates high. The application of 'deeper' PAR methods such as in-depth focus groups and discussions allowed the LERI team to tease out the reasons for this which were primarily related to competing family responsibilities for the women, and a preference for practically focused everyday English among all the adult participants. With this knowledge the interventions could be designed to address these barriers.

The PAR methods were chosen as they are relatively time and cost effective,; could incorporate the views of a range of community members and local stakeholders and proved to be relevant in the local context. They built on the project manager's community networks in the locality and her contacts with Roma community members through her position at Victoria Academy. The methods also activated Medway Plus' knowledge and experience of working on integration and inclusion projects and engaging with different migrant communities in the locality. The methods were 'deep' in providing in-depth qualitative data concerning relevant issues to Roma migrants and also 'light' in terms of the meetings with the key stakeholders, which focused on strategic oversight of PAR, planning the next steps and assigning roles and responsibilities. In addition to the focus group discussions a questionnaire was administered to attendees of the adult class. This collected data pertaining to demographic information (nationality, age, gender, family situation); reasons for coming to England; employment status; barriers experienced and community integration. The benefits of the approach adopted where that it was relatively time and cost effective through utilising community networks and this also served as a method of disseminating information and knowledge about the LERI research to local residents. The disadvantages, as with any qualitative study, are that samples tend to be relatively small and may not represent the views of the wider community. This was mitigated to some extent by including as broad a range of Roma in terms of age and gender as possible as well as conducting focus groups with longer established Gypsy Travellers and spokespeople from those communities. The LERI field expert triangulated findings from the PAR Needs Assessment with findings from professional and stakeholder interviews and a wider body of academic and policy based literature.

The main goal of the LERI research in Medway has been to help facilitate a greater level of integration among Roma and other EU migrants. To achieve this the goals of the LERI research in Medway are to raise language and communication skills by developing a family model of education; to create greater dialogue and understanding between Roma and employees of public and statutory services and to identify leaders from the community to come forward and help the others.

The LERI research in Medway was guided by the following questions:

- What are the key barriers to integration faced by the local Roma community?

- Within the financial and time constraints of LERI what interventions could best address these barriers?
- How could those interventions be organised to produce the best possible outcomes?

## 5. The local intervention description

### Key interventions in the locality

The main activities were chosen after the PAR Needs Assessment phase. On the basis of the findings the LERI local team designed the interventions in consultation with teaching staff who were to run the Saturday activities and community members. The interventions were designed to address three barriers to integration that occurred at three simultaneous levels. These were accessing education to improve language and the ability to engage in the wider society and improving knowledge of public institutions, their rules and regulations and how to access them. Communication issues within the household between adults and children was a further issue identified in the focus that had not been previously identified. Interventions were therefore developed to address the issues identified. A core principle underpinning the activities is that they have the potential to raise aspirations, increase inclusion and promote integration. They also seek to empower by increasing knowledge of how local authority and other service providers operate and how to access and communicate with them thus building capacity and the sustainability of the local engagement process.

Development and elaboration of LERI interventions began in 2014 when a feasibility study and stakeholder analysis was conducted of various urban localities in the UK. These areas had all received significant inflows of EU Roma migrants in recent years, and from this analysis the localities were selected. Following this, an initial LERI local project plan (LPP) for implementing a participatory needs assessment and further research that identified key needs in the locality; proposed interventions and identified key stakeholders and counterparts was produced in 2015. The project implementation phase took place in 2015 – 2016 and included a PAR needs assessment, updating the LPP with the design of local interventions that met the needs identified with the local stakeholders; joint implementation of the local interventions, and monitoring throughout.

LERI interventions (April-October 2016) The LERI interventions in Medway included the following:

*Inclusion through Language:* involved running adult English classes for two hours a week on Saturday mornings. Participants were taught everyday English and employment related skills such as applying for jobs and completing a CV. The aim was to build the skills and confidence necessary for navigating day-to-day life.

*Family based learning:* the aim was to address difficulties around childcare and problems communicating between parents and their children in the home. This provided a range of children's activities that increased knowledge of Czech and Slovak culture and built language skills through a variety of fun and enjoyable

activities such as arts and craft, cultural activities, song and dance and learning about the English way of life.

*Extra Academic Support for High School Pupils:* provided an after school Homework Club to help struggling students from Years 8-11 prior to end of term exams.

*Integration through Dialogue:* community empowerment workshops were held with representatives of public and statutory agencies e.g police, community safety, social workers, educational welfare officers and housing officers. The aim of these events was to break down barriers and mistrust, promote greater engagement and to encourage dialogue and mutual understanding.

*Community Engagement Events:* the purpose of these events was to increase engagement with the wider community, local service providers and statutory agencies and to increase community cohesion. Events included an International Children's Day event on 4th June 2016 and the Final Event on 22nd October 2016 held in All Saints Church Hall. This was attended by the LERI local team, around 100 members of the local Roma and non-Roma communities, and representatives from the local authority and social services. The event was also attended by a local celebrity Jamie Johnson, runner up on BBC TV's 'The Voice'. The event included a talent show by local Roma and non-Roma children and youth; a Miss Roma contest; music and an awards ceremony.

The Saturday adult English classes and children's activities sessions were held at Victoria Academy School and commenced on 23<sup>rd</sup> April running for 10 weeks till 16<sup>th</sup> July when the classes stopped for the summer holidays. They commenced after the summer holidays for another 5 weeks with the final sessions held on 17<sup>th</sup> October. The language classes were conducted by a qualified teacher from Victoria Academy with support from volunteers and the project manager. Classes covered a range of language activities (speaking, listening, reading and writing) with a strong practical and interactive focus. For example specific sessions have covered:

1. Daily communication with schools/teachers/receptionists e.g leaving messages, speaking to teachers; attending meetings; parent's evening.
2. Communicating with GPs/medical staff e.g making appointments; describing symptoms; asking questions/ seeking clarification etc.
3. Communicating with local authorities, e.g housing departments; requesting repairs; dealing with waste; where to seek information etc.
4. Benefits and jobs – benefits and eligibility; how to find out/enquire about benefits; finding jobs; understanding job adverts; interviews etc.
5. Daily interactions – in shops; ordering food; informal talk/ chatting; common phrases/topics etc.
6. Recap/consolidation and revision – consolidation of the topics covered; participant feedback/evaluation; certificate of attendance awarded.

The children's activities ran at the same time and were organised and conducted by two Slovak Teaching Assistants and additional voluntary help. Activities included arts, crafts, music, dance and cultural activities conducted in the student's 'home' language and English where appropriate.

The Homework Club started on 23<sup>rd</sup> May and covered literacy, numeracy and science as well as key life skills. 24 students were registered for this activity and were selected by teaching staff at Victoria Academy on the basis of disadvantaged target groups e.g students requiring English as an Additional Language (EAL); students with Special Educational Needs (SEN) and poor attendees and came from a variety of backgrounds. A qualified teacher from the school held the classes supported by student mentors from the 6<sup>th</sup> form. Classes have stopped for the summer break and will recommenced on 17<sup>th</sup> September 2016 for 5 weeks. A certificate of attendance was awarded to all students who attend all the sessions.

A community empowerment workshop took place on 4<sup>th</sup> June 2016 during the International Children's Day event when representatives from Medway police and community safety representatives attended the event. Here they met with local Roma and other migrants and took part in discussions with various attendees at the event that centred on issues of local concern. On 21<sup>st</sup> June a further community empowerment workshop took place at Victoria Academy. The objective of this event was to increase participants' knowledge of and confidence engaging with, social services and the education system and was hosted by a qualified social worker and a local educational welfare officer. The event was attended by over 20 participants who took part in a discussion group followed by a lively and productive question and answer session. Both the Feasibility Report and needs assessment findings identified poor housing conditions as an important concern in the locality. In response to this a further workshop was planned for January 2017 when Lenka Trent, a member of Medway Council's Private Sector Housing Team would attend. She was asked to discuss tenant's housing rights, available sources of housing support, and respond to any other participants' questions or concerns.

For International Children's Day the community engagement event that took place at Victoria Academy was a great success and was attended by around 70 children and nearly as many adults from the local Roma and East and Central European populations. Apart from the presence of Medway police and community safety unit, the leader of a local National Lottery sponsored residents group and academics from the University of Greenwich attended to observe and engage in fun and educational activities with all ages. This event had a significant and positive influence on the project. The final event in October 2016 showcased the LERI research to the local community and organisations (e.g. local authority, schools and universities). The aim was to present a positive image of Roma and EU citizen migrants to local officials and residents and to bring the different communities together.

The LERI project implementation started later than planned due to administrative issues, meaning that it missed the International Roma Day on April 8, 2016 for which an event was originally planned, although some of the activities planned for this day were incorporated into the final event in October. It was also originally planned to include a representative from a Gypsy/Traveller organisation to run community empowerment workshops and advice on setting up a similar organisation. However, the needs assessment phase indicated that some participants preferred to be identified by their nationality than as Roma, and that a specifically Roma focused organisation may not be popular. Also, not all of the Saturday participants were Roma, with members from several East and

Central European countries also attending on occasion. After deliberation between the LERI field expert, project manager and key stakeholder Medway Plus, and informal discussions with LERI participants it was felt that a Czech Slovak society would be more inclusive as it could include Roma and non-Roma members, and would be less likely to be marginalised than a Roma specific group. As the interventions started later than planned and less than anticipated was spent from the community empowerment budget due to the representatives waiving their fee, the main class based activities were able to continue for a further 5 weeks from September. The funds saved from the community empowerment events were spent on extending the Saturday activities into October, which participants indicated they were happy with.

One very positive change to the original plan was the formation of the Medway Czech-Slovak Association as mentioned above. This was formed to build sustainability and empower LERI participants to put into practice the skills they developed through the LERI activities and do things for themselves. An inaugural meeting was held at All Saints Community Centre on 27<sup>th</sup> May 2016 which was attended by six of the adult LERI participants along with four high school pupils from Victoria Academy. The constitution was agreed and a Chairperson, Secretary, Vice Chair, Treasurer; Sports Education and Activities Leads and two Youth representatives were appointed. In addition another change was that elements of the LERI activities were filmed. The LERI field expert located a local filmmaker/photographer, Sonia Earl, who filmed at the International Children's Day event, during activities at Victoria Academy where she interviewed and filmed key stakeholders and some of the child and adult participants and at the final event.

The project evaluation activities occurred between October and December 2016 although the activities were constantly monitored during the implementation phase by the field expert, project manager, key stakeholder and teaching staff through regular meetings at the end of the Saturday classes. At these meetings the progress of weekly activities, any issues raised by the teaching staff and volunteers and the general strategic direction of LERI was monitored and discussed. Evaluation also took place throughout the implementation stage primarily through discussions between the project manager and project participants in order to collect a frank assessment of the activities which were then fed through to the wider LERI team for consideration. A questionnaire was administered to attendants during the first week to gather preliminary information. Attendance at the activities was monitored by taking a weekly register of participants and additional material (e.g photographs, film, teaching materials, work produced) has been collected and stored for monitoring and evaluation purposes.

## Resources used to implement the interventions

The implementation of the interventions was supported in large part by a local fund that was established through LERI. In addition local public sector authorities (police, community safety, social services, educational welfare and housing officers) provided their time and expertise 'in kind' i.e. for free at the community engagement events. The actual running of interventions benefited greatly from the time and effort of various volunteers. This included a volunteer from a local

newspaper and other volunteers including participants at the adult class who provided occasional assistance when required.

## Stakeholders and partners involved

Primary stakeholders included firstly Roma, and to a lesser extent other EU citizen migrant community members living in the Luton Road and All Saints neighbourhoods of Chatham. However, a welcome development as the activities progressed was an increase in the number of non-Roma participants. In the PAR needs assessment phase the main barriers to integration and what was needed to promote greater inclusion and integration were investigated during focus group discussions with local young people (e.g. high school students) and adults. Their views and suggestions to improve integration focused on the need for communication skills; better knowledge of how public and statutory service providers operate and some advocacy training and development to build confidence in dealing with these organisations. The community had a major input into outlining the priorities of the LERI interventions and in the overall shape (e.g. a 'family' based education model and the type of content that would be most beneficial).

A vital stakeholder has been the LERI project manager, Mrs Oravcova, who has been able to use her role as community liaison officer at Victoria Academy and her experience working with Roma and Czech/Slovak pupils and their families and previous experience working on community integration and cohesion projects. Working in collaboration with the field expert, local Roma residents and the other key stakeholder Medway Plus (a registered charity working with local disadvantaged communities) she has played a key role in organising and facilitating the PAR needs assessment activities; developing the specific projects; organising and recruiting staff and overall management of the weekly activities. Key stakeholders Medway Plus have been able to draw on their experience working with marginalised communities to provide input into the shape and content of the activities and utilise their contacts among local organisations to organise the community empowerment and engagement events through finding speakers; project administration, support and management of the project finances.

Other stakeholders included Medway Council, Social Services, Housing and Education and Kent Police who have attended events and provided representatives to engage in the community empowerment and engagement activities. A potential stakeholder was Arches Local Chatham, a local residents' group, some of whose members attended the International Children's Day event. Around 80 per cent of the LERI participants and/or family live within the Arches Local geographic area and Arches Local has an obligation to support 'their' residents. Several LERI participants attended the Arches 'Big Open Fun Day' in a local park on July 9<sup>th</sup> 2016, indicating a growing confidence and willingness to engage with the local community among LERI participants. It is hoped that with the establishment of the Medway Czech and Slovak Society, a sustainable relationship can be developed between the two groups with possible collaborative funding opportunities explored in order to organise activities and run projects benefiting local residents.

No particular individual or group within the community promoted any specific intervention. Rather, there was a general consensus among focus group

members and during interviews with local officials and stakeholders that poor language skills were at the root of, and impacted upon, social integration in the broadest sense. Having established what was considered as the most fundamental barrier to integration the next stage consisted of developing interventions that could address those barriers most successfully given the particular circumstances of participant's lives and their social context. It was noted in the LERI preparation stage that women were generally more engaged outside their own community via having to engage with the school and it was women who were more active in coming forward and taking part in the needs assessment and preparatory discussions for LERI than men. It was therefore apparent that child care was a significant barrier to their participation in language classes and other activities that might improve their communication skills. Moreover community engagement and empowerment emerged as a prominent issue as it is largely the female members of the community that interact most frequently with external agencies and institutions due to their role as primary caregivers for their children (e.g dealing with schools, healthcare providers, local authority officials). It is quite feasible that if more men had taken part in the focus groups that the LERI interventions may have had a different focus for example, more emphasis given to employment related skills/qualifications, though developing language skills and knowledge of UK life was considered a necessary prerequisite for this.

Community members defined the issues and parameters concerning the main barriers to integration and how to address them. The primary stakeholders (country coordinator, project manager, key stakeholder and trainers) developed the actual structure and content of the interventions. This was based on research undertaken by the field expert into different learning strategies for engaging Roma and other marginalised communities in education and the collective experience of the LERI local team with community engagement and more specifically, with the local Roma and migrant population. The division of roles reflected the skills and competencies of the different stakeholders with the field expert providing strategic oversight, fulfilling the requirements of the research (e.g. writing and delivery of reports, local project plans, budget) and liaising between the FRA, implementing consortium and local team; key stakeholder Medway Plus drew on their local contacts and knowledge, provided project administration and coordination and budget management. The local project manager provided the link to the local community and attended to the fine details of implementing the interventions on a weekly basis and overseeing their successful delivery. As the proposed actions evolved the LERI local team consulted with community members and refined the interventions according to feedback received. The Roma community were hindered somewhat from taking a more proactive role in shaping the details of the interventions by a lack of community spokespeople/mediators; language barriers and a lack of confidence and experience in project implementation and evaluation. The LERI interventions were designed to address these issues and build capacity by equipping LERI participants with the necessary skills, confidence and know how to take a more active role in developing projects to promote integration and in monitoring and evaluating their strengths and weaknesses.

It was proposed to open LERI to other migrant groups and UK born locals (where communication and key life skills can also be lacking) as it was felt this would increase community cohesion, facilitate integration between different groups in a

similar socioeconomic circumstances and potentially benefit a wider population. While the main focus of the LERI research remained largely Roma, a welcome development was that over time the classes attracted more participants from the wider migrant population and included attendees from Czech Republic, Slovakia, Bulgaria, Lithuania, Russia and Romania. They all live in the Luton and All Saints neighbourhoods and most of their children attend the Victory Academy and/or the Phoenix Academy (a local junior school). The participants have been highly engaged in the LERI activities from week one and many have attended regularly since the beginning. The attendance rate for the Saturday Adult Classes has averaged 17 participants per week with up to 20-25 attending on some weeks and new attendees joining since the beginning of the classes. Similarly the children are very engaged with and enjoying the Children's Activities classes. These too have been well attended with between 15-20 children attending weekly. Despite some fluctuations in attendance (for example tailing off a little in the last two weeks before the summer holidays) levels of attendance at the Saturday classes have been sustained throughout the first 12 weeks of LERI. This is extremely encouraging especially when considering the tendency for attendance at ESOL (English for Speakers of Other Languages) classes to be lower among Roma than other migrants. For the Homework Club Victoria Academy staff selected 24 students from years 8-11 of various backgrounds, all of whom were struggling academically. Attendance at the Club has been high with an average of 20 students attending and students have engaged enthusiastically.

An evaluation of the three classes including consultation and feedback was undertaken between October and December 2016 and has been incorporated into this report where indicated. Insights and feedback from staff and volunteers organising and running the classes and the observations of the country coordinator, project manager and key stakeholder indicates that the classes have been very well received by participants whose skills are developing and who are steadily growing in confidence. A focus group with attendants from the adult class, the project manager and country coordinator took place on 22nd November 2016. Participants felt that the classes had been useful because they focused on practical language and were highly interactive. One female noted that 'I liked it that we could talk a lot and practice instead of just listen and write'. This allowed the participants to practice English for particular scenarios. A male focus group participant noted that the classes had increased his confidence and knowledge of English which had led to him being promoted to a 'Team Leader' at work while one of the female attendees remarked that she had made progress and that her listening skills in particular were a lot better than they had been before. When asked how LERI could be developed in the future all agreed that they would like to develop their English further and once it was of a required standard to attend vocational classes. Males expressed a preference for training towards the Construction Skills Certification Scheme (CSCS) while the women were more interested in training for a Food Hygiene Certificate, thus enabling them to work in the catering/restaurant sectors, or for sewing classes. Most attendees of the adult classes have enquired when the classes would start again to the project manager.

Evidence of increasing engagement, communication skills, confidence levels and self-esteem was the participants' suggestion that a Medway Czech and Slovak Society be formed to use the skills they are building through the LERI research

once it has ended and they will continue to receive support from the LERI local team to develop this organisation and apply for funds. The social worker who attended the community empowerment event commented that 'I never realised how little they [Roma women] knew of child protection procedures and safeguarding issues in this country. To that extent I think they learned a lot from me and I learned a lot from them. I would certainly feel better informed if I had a Roma client in future and I'd hope they now have more awareness of the circumstances in which we [social services] would become involved if there were any concerns.'<sup>8</sup> The women in particular were especially appreciative of the community empowerment events and the consultations with education welfare and housing officers, representatives from the police and social workers etc. One Slovak Roma woman noted that 'it was very helpful. I didn't know we need medical evidence if our son was away from school so we were in trouble with the school. Now I know so I know what to do when he is sick'.

The Homework Club was attended by approximately 14-15 Year 10 and 11 students and provided them with extra academic support and ran community cohesion workshops to increase mutual understanding and respect between these students of diverse backgrounds. Evaluation occurred through verbal feedback to the local LERI project manager and a questionnaire that was completed by 11 students who attended. Of these nine attended all sessions, one attended most (9-10 sessions) and one attended some (5-8). The most frequently noted positive aspect was the teachers, new friends that were made and the pizza that was provided. The most useful aspects were the opportunity to learn new things and the improvement in English skills and confidence that resulted. One pupil for example noted that 'the activities we did helped me enjoy learning' while another commented that 'I feel more confident in lessons'. All of the 11 pupils who completed the feedback said they would like the Club to continue and for it to be more frequent than once a week.

## 6. Analysis, discussion, lessons learned

PAR is a methodological approach that involves research participants in the knowledge production process and to this end a range of strategies were employed to enhance active participation in decision making throughout all aspects of the LERI research. The methods have sought to include a wide cross section of the local Roma community and their active participation in the needs assessment phase has been an important factor in the success of the interventions to date. For example the participatory approach allowed us to discover not only what the key barrier to integration e.g. none or poor language skills among the adults, but also to develop approaches to overcome them in a collaborative way so the classes focused on practical, 'everyday' English and were based on a family learning model that solved problems around child care and family responsibilities. It was also important in other ways, as noted by one of the volunteers, Bianca Oravcova, who commented in her evaluation on 28th November 2016 that 'the use of a family learning model to increase community engagement through learning has proven successful. I have seen a rise in attendance when adults were able to bring their children along and it felt like a collective family attempt to fit into the community.'

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<sup>8</sup> Telephone interview, social worker 15<sup>th</sup> November 2016.

As discussed, PAR activities were collaborative at every stage and built on preparatory work (e.g. interviews with local authority staff, community workers and statutory service providers) undertaken for the preparatory stages of LERI. The Czech Slovak Society was formed during the intervention phase and comprised of community members, the country coordinator and key stakeholders (e.g. the local LERI project manager, Medway Plus and project staff). This acted as a focus point for evaluating LERI. Events such as the community engagement and empowerment events were based on feedback from the community about what information/knowledge they need e.g. in relation to social services, housing, education, etc. and that they previously lacked. As a result they could find themselves inadvertently breaking rules that they were unaware existed, which made them increasingly reluctant to access some services as previous experiences with them had been negative. The workshops promoted community engagement by providing a forum where concerns and questions could be addressed in a two way dialogue and increased the knowledge and confidence of Roma participants.

With the end of the LERI project the next aim will be to identify how the interventions can be improved in future and to develop a strategy for sustainability. The Czech Slovak Society provides one element; the fact that one of the Roma attendees, Juraj Pohlodko, has joined the Medway Youth Parliament and the Kent Roma Interest Group (KRIG), adopting most elements of the LERI interventions indicate that the research has achieved a good level of sustainability, considering this was a relatively small-scale set of interventions. Having taken the first tentative steps towards social engagement, the LERI participants are eager for more as Marie Thibault, a representative of Medway Plus commented on 28 November 2016, 'many new suggestions came out of the project which will inform new and future projects. Examples being helping with IT training and ways to improve their employability'. The structure of the activities provided opportunities for participants to provide feedback to the teachers and volunteers on a weekly basis and these were communicated to the country coordinator and key stakeholders at regular meetings after the classes. This helped to ensure that the projects were driven by the priorities as defined by the participants and responsive to their needs.

Since the preparatory work there have been significant external factors affecting LERI, such as budget cuts and staff losses in the local authority. As a result the local authority played a smaller role than originally intended. Nevertheless this created opportunities for community organisations and charities to fill the void and LERI was able to capitalise on these developments and form partnerships with community organisations and key personnel with close knowledge of the community and local politics. This was undoubtedly an important factor in the successful implementation of the LERI activities, and in finding local stakeholders from various organisations willing to participate in the community empowerment events.

LERI interventions were supported by volunteers from the Roma and non-Roma communities. For example, during the Saturday classes teaching staff were assisted by volunteers and the International Children's Day and final events involved the input of participants in making food and costumes for the events. The project attracted interest from other community organisations (e.g. Local Arches, KRIG) and activists and academics working on Roma issues through the

field expert's activity in various networks and organisations. The local authority had little involvement in the implementation of LERI for the reasons outlined above, namely budget cuts, staff losses and the downgrading of social regeneration as a priority. However, representatives from the local authority took part in community engagement activities and was appraised of the progress of LERI and invited to community events. A local journalist attended the community engagement events and Saturday classes and representatives from the local authority and other organisations attended the final event.

The LERI interventions were a bottom-up initiative and developed to address the key barriers to integration as defined by the Roma community during the needs assessment phase. Interventions were based on evidence about 'what works' in reducing drop-out rates from language classes and were designed to fit the Roma family structure and practices, as Marie Thibault, a representative from Medway Plus observed, this encouraged attendance: "new Roma families kept coming and wanted to attend the classes, even at the end they were still coming so it would have been good to extend the project". With the preferences of community members in mind, activities were designed to educate, build key life skills and be practical yet also interactive and enjoyable. A core principle underpinning the activities is that they should have the potential to raise aspirations, increase inclusion and promote integration. Participants have since shown greater empowerment through a rise in community engagement; increased levels of confidence both in their English language skills and in their understanding of, and engagement with, various service providers. One of the volunteers remarked on 14<sup>th</sup> November for example that 'their [adults'] English has improved which could lead to a better quality of life as they can fit into the community better but are able to contact social services and third parties regarding their quality of life such as housing and health.'

Given the promising outcomes of the research to date and the interest from other organisations discussed above, LERI will act as a template of best practice for organisations looking to develop local interventions based on PAR techniques. For example a Kent-wide bid to the Big Local Fund has been submitted by a consortium led by KRIG with Medway Plus as one of the key partners. The bid for £358,000 passed the first, most difficult stage and one of the key factors in passing the next stage will be Medway Plus because of its engagement record (including LERI) who are tasked with leading on community engagement activities in all five target regions of Kent. The KRIG proposal cites the LERI project as a promising approach to engaging with Roma communities. If the bid is successful it will replicate many of the aspects of LERI and build on the know-how and expertise of the key counterparts. The possibility is also being discussed that the Medway Czech Slovak Society which was formed by LERI participants make an application (with the assistance and guidance of the key counterparts) to the Big Local fund to continue running some of the interventions that LERI has initiated. The key stakeholders in LERI are also developing a small cross border partnership to tap into possible INTERREG Channel Programme funding while it is still available, and on behalf of the KRIG partnership, we are working on an expanded idea which could include Medway Plus working with Norfolk County Council and CEFIR from France to put together a Roma integration project on both sides of the Channel. Ideas are currently being discussed in addition to meetings with the Kent Association of Local Councils (KALC) who would also welcome any regional or EU project development. To sum up, there is a

considerable amount of interest in what is going on in Medway in terms of the working relationship established with Roma through LERI and its positive outcomes.

## 7. Conclusions and recommendations

LERI was intended as a small-scale grassroots action research that would achieve concrete changes at the local level. The interventions in Medway were designed to address the key barriers to integration identified in the consultation and needs assessment phases of the project. The root of these barriers was identified as poor language skills and a lack of community engagement or interaction. The interventions were designed to equip participants with the skills and confidence to increase their participation in society through improving their language skills; knowledge of life in the UK and how to engage with service providers in health, education, social services, housing and the police. The PAR methods chosen were effective in providing the conditions for active participation of Roma and other migrants in deciding the priorities and structure of the interventions through focus groups, consultation and evaluation both during and after the intervention phase. Many participants have shown improvement in their language skills and confidence, and have gained important life skills through the interventions. The formation of the Medway Czech Slovak Association as an outcome of LERI is a positive contribution towards community development and engagement. As Peter Vogel, a representative from Medway Plus commented on 17<sup>th</sup> November 'LERI overachieved in many ways. Numbers increased and 'bonus' results included the creation of a constituted society'. The LERI field expert and key stakeholders will give further consideration to how best to support this initiative now that the interventions have ended.

Reflecting on the experiences of organising and implementing LERI in Medway there were a number of drivers of integration. Policy recommendations at the local level would highlight the importance of an effective intermediary who is known to the Roma and other migrant communities, and who preferably has or is working with them in some capacity. In Medway this meant that the networks and relationships that LERI could tap into were already in existence. This is particularly important in communities where language skills are poor and people lack the skills and confidence to interact outside their own communities. In Medway it was fortunate that the local LERI project manager had already well established networks and relations of trust in the local community through her position at the Victory Academy and had experience working with local Roma pupils and their families. Furthermore, Roma participation was encouraged by the activities of the key stakeholders who were able to draw on their experience of engaging with communities and knowledge of the local authority and grassroots organisations. Participation was further ensured by holding the events at a familiar location and creating a non-hierarchical environment where the LERI local team and participants in the interventions were co-producers of the interventions. To achieve this, the Victory Academy served as a hub for the needs assessment activities and the LERI interventions as this site was familiar with the pupils many of whom attended the school or who had siblings in attendance. The adults were also well acquainted at the school as many came to bring their children to school or to attend meetings with teachers and other events.

What LERI has shown is that the Roma community (though not all as discussed below) are willing to engage in adult education and will attend regularly when the conditions are in place to enable this, meaning further empowerment and integration is possible with the right support. Further thought needs to be given to how to engage more men in such similar activities as under the LERI research, as females participated in greater numbers and with more regularity than did men. Bianca Oravcova, one of the LERI volunteers noted that 'one of the biggest obstacles impeding the LERI interventions was the ability to keep the same number of people for each class and the engagement of men'. There could be several reasons which were explored during evaluation. The most frequent explanation is that many men work in casual employment where they can be easily fired if they are absent from work, with most working long hours for low pay. As a result, many were either working on Saturdays or were too tired to attend. This became apparent as the activities progressed, and is a serious obstacle to social integration and improving employability skills for males, which may require further PAR assessment to develop solutions to this barrier. Another issue for consideration is how to engage with Gypsies/Travellers which fall under the Council of Europe's umbrella term "Roma." The needs assessment phase indicated that the needs of these groups, who evolved entirely separately from Roma migrants, are quite distinct from the latter and as a consequence were not addressed in this project. Separate funding to address the exclusion of Gypsy/Traveller communities based on PAR methods would go a long way to addressing this omission. Finally, local level actions would be better supported with a more inclusive focus on the UK born sections of neighbourhoods like Luton. Medway scores poorly across the government indices of deprivation with the situation worsening between 2010 and 2015.<sup>9</sup> Many UK born residents also experience low skills, unemployment, poor job prospects and poverty yet their needs are not catered for under EU structural funds for migrant integration and they are increasingly cut adrift from government and local authority support due to funding cuts. While community engagement events are a good way to bring different sections of the community together, building more permanent forms of cohesion requires greater cooperation between community-based groups and organisations which will be one of the next tasks facing the LERI team in Medway.

## 8. Additional Information

The LERI local team in Medway would like to thank Fawad Bhatti, formerly of Medway Council for his help in the early phases of the research, and for providing the field expert with the contacts to those who later became the LERI team. Thanks are due to the Victory Academy for their support for the LERI research and for Laura Gladstone (Assistant Principal for Teaching and Learning) and Mandy Gage (Principal) in particular. The teaching staff and volunteers who ran the activities with professionalism, dedication and enthusiasm deserve special thanks, as do Medway Plus and the local LERI project manager Monika Oravcova of the Victory Academy who worked with dynamism and energy to achieve a successful outcome. We are particularly grateful to Sheena Keller from FRA; Rossella Nicoletti and Petra Van Nierop from ICF for their support, guidance

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<sup>9</sup> The City Council of Medway, Index of Deprivation, 2015, available at: <http://www.medway.gov.uk/pdf/Index%20of%20Multiple%20Deprivation%202015.pdf>

and patience throughout the LERI research. Final thanks go to all those Roma and non-Roma who participated in the activities and shared their views and experiences with the LERI local team. All respondents whose names are included in this report have given their prior permission.