

Luton Roma Trust - Our Mission & Vision

December 2015

Luton Roma Trust is a non-profit making organization, which follows the principles of the Christian Gospel and works holistically to enhance the lives of the Roma community of Luton, meeting them in their deepest needs, and supporting their emancipation and social integration within the wider life of our town.

Luton Roma Trust was established by the Anglican Diocese of St Albans in 2015.

Luton Roma Trust has the following broad aims:

1. To promote healthy, cross-cultural dialogue between the Roma and the wider community.
2. To challenge the stereotyping of the Roma people and the prejudices held against them.
3. To promote mutual tolerance and respect between the Roma and the wider community.
4. To encourage the Roma to engage more actively in the life of the town, and to understand what it means to be a citizen of the UK.
5. To encourage the agencies and organisations of Luton to include the Roma in their outreach programmes and policies.
6. To work in partnership with other agencies to ensure that the full internal potential of the Roma people is released and realised.
7. To stimulate the Roma to develop their own initiatives and generate sustainable community development for their people.

Luton Roma Trust has the following immediate specific aims:

1. To raise the educational level of the Roma children and young adults.
2. To raise the economic status of the Roma families by helping them to access employment.
3. To raise their standard of health by encouraging healthy life-styles and ensure they have easy access to medical services.
4. To assist the Roma in actively celebrating their culture, language and heritage.
5. To stimulate the growth of the Roma church in Luton and uphold the potential of the Christian Gospel to transform both lives and communities.
6. To ensure that the voice of the Roma themselves is included in the policy making bodies of Luton: "Nothing about them without them!" The creation of the post of "Roma Community Champion" in June 2015 was a first step.

Luton Roma Trust places high value on:

- The values of the Christian Gospel
- Transparency
- Honesty
- Inclusivity
- Mutual respect and trust
- Team work
- An action-reflection-action pattern of working
- Innovative thinking
- Fresh initiatives
- Empowering the disempowered
- "Nothing about them without them"
- A place and a voice for the Roma in the wider community
- Consideration of the needs and capacities of the Roma people
- Participation of all stakeholders
- Partnerships with other organisations and churches
- Networking with other NGOs
- Respect for the rule of law
- Accountability to the Church of England
- Respect for those of other faiths and none
- Awareness of the super-diversity of multi-cultural Luton

Luton Roma Trust & the creation of strategic partnerships

1) Local Partnerships

For real and sustainable community transformation to take place we recognise the imperative of deepening our existing partnerships with the following local agencies:

- Luton Borough Council
- Schools & Universities
- NHS
- Social services
- Job Centre Plus
- Employment agencies
- Housing agencies
- Legal services
- The police
- Other denominations and churches

We are confident that the number of local partnerships will gradually increase as new needs arise and new relationships are formed.

At the heart of the dialogue with our local agencies it is vital that the voice of the Roma people is heard at every level, in every context and in every situation. We need to be in genuine partnership with the Roma community itself. We therefore seek to identify and raise up from within disparate Roma communities of Luton those who will act as representatives of their own people.

2) National and International Partnerships

An important resource for the success of the local programmes is the long-term strategic partnership between Gypsy, Roma, & Traveller organizations and networks of active NGOs across the UK and Europe. The partnership of Luton Roma Trust with ACERT, NFGLG, NATT+, the Roma Support Group (London), Migration Yorkshire and other organizations will greatly enhance our efforts to bring the issues facing the Roma to the attention of the statutory bodies.

3) Creative partnerships with the media

We will develop further our positive collaboration with the local and national press, the BBC and other media organisations. As well as promoting the work of Luton Roma Trust, a counterpoint is provided to the often racist and xenophobic language of the media. We recognise the growing capacity of the internet and social networks to raise awareness of the issues facing the Roma and to work towards their inclusion.

4) Partnerships in the Gospel

Luton Roma Trust is an active member of the Churches Network for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma. In partnership with many other Christian denominations, we work collaboratively with other churches across the UK to promote the inclusion of the Roma people into the mainstream life of the nation.

Much work has yet to be done to build bridges between the mainstream denominations and the burgeoning Roma Pentecostal churches across Europe.

Luton Roma Trust places high value on the Gospel vision of one new humanity in Christ and seeks to build trust and unity across the spectrum.

Contextual analysis

1] The UK within the EU

The Roma minority communities continue to be the most marginalized group in UK society with limited access to the social, economic and political spheres of influence and development resources. The rapidly growing structural problems lead to an even greater exclusion of the Roma people from public life. Observations, analysis and statistical data all show that there have been no considerable changes that have occurred in the UK with regard to the Roma people and their limited life chances.

It has to be noted that more and more Roma people come from Eastern European EU Member States on a weekly basis, yet the government is not prepared to acknowledge their difficulties and include them formally within the national strategy for Gypsy and Traveller integration (albeit only when policy areas overlap – See comments below). There are few professional workers attending to the needs of Roma in the UK and indeed their needs are different to traditional UK Gypsies and Travellers. There are some well-established mechanisms and practices for local Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people but only for educational integration. Other key spheres (such as housing/accommodation, health and employment) are not usually covered.

On the 5th April 2011 the European Commission adopted the EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020, which marks its unprecedented commitment to promoting the inclusion of Roma (including Gypsy and Traveller communities) communities in all Member States. As a way forward, the European Commission has given member States a wide discretion as to how to implement the EU Framework to tackle the disadvantages faced by Roma communities in their respective countries. **Unfortunately many West European member states did not make any efforts in this direction, they just mechanically applied their old policy documents without taking in into account that the situation has changed in many such countries.** In London for example, there are not only the sizable traditional Gypsy/Traveller people but also a significant influx of Roma people from Central and Eastern European Member States, who have come to settle and find work.

In the UK, a decision has been taken, that the Ministerial Working Group on Preventing and Tackling Gypsy and Traveller Inequalities facilitated by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG), should lead on the National Roma Integration Strategy. The Ministerial Working Group has decided to exclude Roma from this strategy, except “...where their issues overlap with those impacting on this country’s ethnic Gypsies and Travellers.” **In practice this means that apart from education, the complex challenges facing the UK’s large Roma population will continue to be ignored.**

According to European Commission experts, one of the major problems to be addressed and solved in relation to the EU strategy 2020, is the situation of the Roma minority. In the next few years the EU will allocate more than 12 billion Euros for activities related to Roma integration into European Member State societies. A large number of those projects will be implemented by local civil society organizations or NGOs, which have the necessary capacity. At the same time we have to convince local authorities to update their information about Roma families coming from Europe (mainly Central and Eastern European states).

A major part of the work of Luton Roma Trust is to challenge the UK statutory bodies to understand their responsibility towards our new Roma migrants and to lay hold of fresh opportunities afforded by EU funding to help the Roma integrate in our country.

2) Why is it so hard to make real progress?

The Luton Roma Trust recognises the following major factors, which give rise to the present difficulties. These factors are a complex amalgam of economic, social, political, religious, cultural and historical issues:

1. Continuous social-economic 'sinking' of the target group – abject poverty

Low levels of educational achievements - high levels of illiteracy.

Although this sad reality is true for many marginalised groups, it is particularly true for GRT communities in Europe. In England, the national data on educational outcomes is well below all other minority ethnic groups. Roma people coming from Central and Eastern Europe are characterized by structural poverty with low educational achievement and a history of limited access to social and health care services. Most of the new migrant families live in overpopulated houses with poor levels of hygiene and environmental health conditions. Initially, the survival of most of the families requires dependency on social assistance. Quite often the access to social care and services is restricted for a number of reasons. Some families have low civic literacy in terms of a sound knowledge and understanding about their rights and existing relevant regulations. These problems are compounded by the language barrier that all Roma migrants when entering the UK.

2. Underdevelopment of the civil sector

The adverse circumstances of Roma families have a negative impact on their capacity to form self-help citizen organisations and initiative action groups. Such developments would allow them to collectively identify their problems and challenges and to take positive and assertive action to solve these problems without being a burden on the state. Dozens of registered NGOs exist but the number of those which are active is still very limited. Informal Roma groups register as they strive to change the situation for their communities in different spheres. Meanwhile a substantial part of the NGOs do not have the expertise and capacity needed, and most are just working on a piece-meal basis. Their strategies are determined not by their realistic mission but by the priorities in their donors' policies. At the moment a generation change is under way with many young people entering into the sector, but who still lack the necessary preparation, knowledge and experience.

3. Survival vs. Transformation?

In the face of these difficulties it is very hard for the Roma to move beyond a life-style of merely surviving and towards a genuine, deep transformation of their situation. The wider environment of prejudice and discrimination further deepen the problems the Roma have in engaging with education and integration. They are commonly so beset with acute daily crises in all areas of their lives, that the opportunities for more long term development are simply not on their horizon.

Luton Roma Trust responds in two ways:

- Firstly, to help the Roma glimpse a future, which they have hitherto not even dreamt of.
- Secondly, to challenge the agencies to understand the plight of the Roma, and to explore how they can help the next generation to transcend the problems of the parents and become fully integrated, contributing members of society.

4. Lack of consistent state policy for cooperation with the citizen organizations

As everywhere else in the UK, local institutions have to apply new governing practices to work together with their constituencies. Local councils need assistance in designing and implementing programmes for Roma integration, which are owned by the wider community. However, the institutions still find it difficult to accept the Roma organizations as equal partners because they know little about them and about their role in civic society. The lack of communication and genuine dialogue between the institutions and the Roma organizations hampers any real progress being made towards the full integration of the GET Roma communities within society.

5. Danger of increasing the radical populist attitudes against Roma communities.

The last few years have shown that the movements of radical xenophobic political attitudes all over Europe, as well in the UK, are gaining more power at the expense of disadvantaged groups and especially of Roma communities. There exists a real danger, although not great at present, that radical populist movements deprived of political representation would prevail and take power by using the widespread dissatisfaction of recent economic instability. For the limitation of this threat it is necessary that the civic organizations make more active efforts for mobilizing purposeful citizen activity, for building citizen self-confidence and self-awareness, based on democratic values. In this regard the efforts for empowerment of excluded groups and disadvantaged communities are of particular importance, and will feature as a high priority of the Luton Roma Trust.

In summary, Luton Roma Trust responds by...

- Recognising that there is no quick fix the deeply rooted problems we have identified,
- Upholding the Christian commitment to a society in which all have equal value and equal chances to realise their potential,
- Challenging racism and xenophobia in all its forms,
- Working from *both* the grass-roots up, *and* the top down, to bring about a systematic change in the place of the Roma in the wider community,
- Engaging with *both* with the Roma on the ground, *and* with the institutions and agencies towards a new future in which the Roma will be fully accepted and integrated in society,
- Bringing to the attention of the comfortable and powerful the basic human rights that continue to be denied to the Roma communities of Europe,
- Bodying forth in all our interventions, all our dialogue and all our actions a future and a hope for the Roma people.

Martin Burrell & Assen Slavchev

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