

EURO
CITIES



Leeds boosts migrant support project

Drop-in service encourages Roma residents to access advice and help

Leeds has developed and supported a new service, initiated by a community member, to engage the city's growing Roma population. By providing a warm welcome and practical help from volunteers who speak their language, the drop-in service is connecting these difficult-to-reach residents with the services and skills they need to thrive.

Leeds is home to a Roma community of approximately 5,000. It has long been known that this migrant group is the least likely to get to grips with how things work in the city and make the most of the services available. The language barrier is a primary factor, as is a lack of understanding about entitlements and responsibilities. Some recent and imminent changes to eligibility criteria for welfare benefits will affect some EU migrant groups and are compounding these problems.

Keenly aware that the city needed to find a way of reaching its Roma residents and helping them feel secure, get into work and put down roots, Leeds had run some initiatives specifically for them using the successful Migrant Access Project (MAP) model. MAP trains natural leaders from migrant groups as volunteer advocates within their own communities. One of the Roma volunteers Ruzena Sarkozyova, a trained Migrant Community Networker, used her role within MAP to suggest and develop the new initiative when she saw that more needed to be done to engage the community.



Communities are responding to problems by coming to us with ideas and solutions. We develop their ideas because they know what will work for their community and we develop their skills so they can take forward initiatives that will benefit the community and the city



Pria Bhabra, Migration Programme Manager, Leeds City Council

Opening the doors

As a trained MAP volunteer with good English and understanding of the Roma community's needs, Ruzena had found herself supporting many families desperate for help in her own home. She then came across an informal Polish drop-in service called POMOC, a recognised shared Eastern European word for help. Would it be possible, she asked,

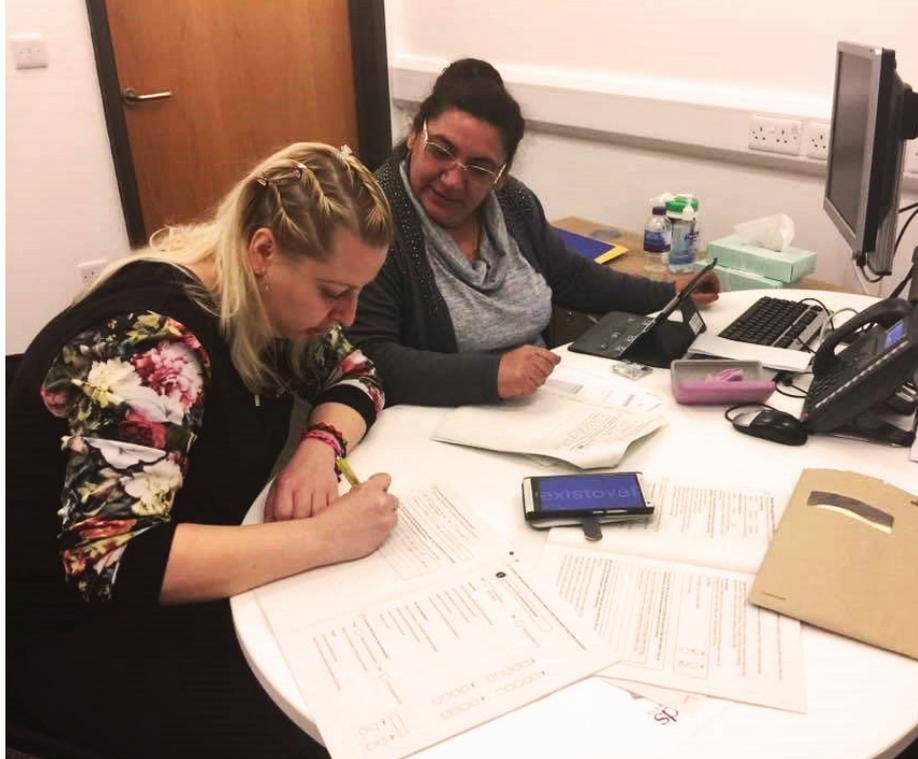
cities in action

July 2018

where: Leeds, UK
what: participation
when: 2014 - ongoing

to set up a similar service for her community? The city not only said yes, it also formalised the POMOC service and gave it space in two local community hubs where citizens access council services.

Once a week, the POMOC drop-in sets up shop in the hubs, which are close to the majority of the Eastern European and Roma communities. Knowing there is someone there who speaks their language and comes from the same background reduces any fear and encourages people to open the door. Once inside, they are met by a friendly face and someone who is ready and able to help – with form filling or more complex problems. Whether these relate to welfare benefits, housing or schooling, they can be introduced immediately to the right customer service team.



I used to help people who came to my home but now I can support them with housing, jobs, benefits, school issues, translation and much more through the POMOC service

Ruzena Sarkozyova, Migrant Community Networker and Roma POMOC volunteer



Making an impact

The service supported 60 people in its first six months, with 100% of enquiries requiring translation. It has now been running for four years and the number of volunteers has grown to four. These volunteers are trained in advocacy, safeguarding, confidentiality and more by the advocacy service. Those that have been helped have become more confident and better able to integrate and make friends and contribute to the city. Some are now happy to seek help at the community hub on non-POMOC days, which would never have happened before. In turn, service providers have learnt how they can better engage with the Roma community and what services need to be expanded or added at the community hub.

The POMOC drop-in prompts people to deal with letters and enquiries as soon as they arise. Working in partnership with the council helps to ensure information is accurate and to prevent delays, which can have a disastrous knock-on

effect. As one typical user says, "As I am required to do things online, such as housing benefit applications, I find communicating in English difficult and POMOC has helped me to overcome my fears and supported my needs."

Extending the service

This level of impact owes much to the initiative's unique community-led approach. There's a real passion behind the volunteers' drive to run and develop the drop-in. They also appreciate the traditions of Roma family life and schedule services and activities accordingly. The city has added to these success factors. It has ensured a consistent approach by giving the volunteers seats on the POMOC Steering Committee chaired by the council. Community hub staff have also been very supportive, ensuring they provide a consistent service for all citizens while showing flexibility in working around the Roma community's needs and positivity about further proposals for the drop-in service.

These proposals are ambitious. They include extending the initiative to more of the city-wide community hubs and targeting specific groups within the community. They will also consider other ideas suggested by the volunteers such as setting up a women's group linked to healthcare, activity classes to learn English and support for those looking for employment, sporting opportunities and friendship. To enable these activities, volunteers' expenses are provided through the MAP and the POMOC service is looking into future funding options to establish and sustain POMOC.

