

Civil Society Consulting CIC Founder Director, Mark Ereira-Guyer, recently spoke to George Dura based in Middlesbrough, who has established a new community interest company called **Durability North**.

The CIC is dedicated to supporting the **newly-arrived communities of Eastern Europe** and the **Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities** with mutual aid, integration and advocacy.

George is also a Community Connector for CSC's new pilot programme, CSC Connecting, which connects refugees, migrants and others needing support with mentors to help them lead flourishing lives.

Here's what they had to say...



Left: Mark Ereira-Guyer, Right: George Dura

**Mark:** Why did you decide to set up the CIC and how did your fellow directors (Amanda and Hugh) get involved?

**George:** I want to create a CIC to help Eastern Europeans and the GRT community as well. There was a lack of information on different subjects like: social benefits, employment, GP, social inclusion and integration, and education. We can help all these people to get a better understanding of the UK system and how it functions, so that they can best navigate their way around and succeed in their lives in the UK.

I, Amanda and Hugh have worked together over the past three years, becoming a good team. So when I set up the CIC I involved them, and I have a lot to learn from their varied and extensive experiences.

**Mark:** Why did they get involved and what are their personal motivations and ambitions for the CIC?

**George:** Probably because of my enthusiasm, :)?

Amanda and Hugh are always glad to be part of new projects, to explore new roads. They want to be a part of the process to help newcomers to integrate into UK society

**Mark:** What do you all do in your day jobs?

**George:** I am a Community Development and Cohesion Officer in a deprived area (Middlesbrough Council). In my job I try to create and involve communities in different activities, so in my role, depending on the situation, I'm a youth worker, music leader, volunteer, community ambassador and even as an interpreter when required.

Amanda is the manager of a Community Hub in Breckon Hill with over 25 years of experience in the voluntary sector. She supports Middlesbrough's different communities and people in need through the Hub and its projects.

Hugh is a Safe Neighbourhoods Officer and deals with community issues like antisocial behaviour, security, and welfare of the residents. He was also a youth worker and has experience as a manager on the Council.

**Mark:** Tell us some things about your journey as someone who is Roma, how did you find yourself in Middlesbrough?

**George:** I am an Eastern European, a Romanian and a Roma. I've always wanted to come to the UK because of the language, my studies, and what life in the UK looks like.

I found the South of the UK to be too expensive, so I decided to opt for the good old North. I am from the north in Romania as well. A friend told me about Middlesbrough. I moved here and I

was happy that the rent was more affordable compared to other places in the UK, unfortunately no one told me why.

As a Romanian I was glad that I was not alone in Middlesbrough and hoped I'd make new friends. Coming from abroad and having to replant your roots it's not easy at all.

At first I was glad that no one cared how I looked as I walked on the streets, but later on I found out that it's not advisable to let people know that you are a part of the GRT community, even in the UK – the stigma out there and the stereotypes are not easily erased from the collective memory.

**Mark:** What is the experience of Roma people in the UK and now in the North East?

**George:** There are pockets of the Eastern European GRT community in all major cities throughout the UK. They don't feel safe or secure because they know that once people realise that they are from the GRT community, or because they are Eastern European, they will be harassed.

**Mark:** What are the challenges they face?

**George:** They face racism, discrimination, and a lack of understanding of life in the UK (e.g. school, education, health, work). Not knowing the language also prevents them from communicating well with their neighbours or public authorities.

**Mark:** What are they doing when they are not working, i.e. after work in their leisure time?

**George:** Most of them they work in factories and warehouses – usually you will find them in low-paid jobs with few opportunities for the future.

When they have finished working, many gather outside to socialise but others feel intimidated when they see them in groups. Many attend church services on the weekend or go to local parks with their friends and families.

**Mark:** Is there a community hub locally?

**George:** Unfortunately, Eastern Europeans do not have community hubs or centres where I live. There are local community hubs created and developed by the local authority in Middlesbrough, but the activities are focused on other target groups.

**Mark:** How do people from Roma (and GTR) come together?

**George:** People from the Roma community usually just visit each other or go to local parks and attend church services. There aren't any designated places in Middlesbrough for this community. They need someone to act as a connector and help them celebrate their background and make them aware of future opportunities.

**Mark:** What will people be saying about your CIC in five years' time?

**George:** They will be able to say that we've supported them and created a path for them in Middlesbrough to get better jobs and gave back to our community many skilled workers. They will say that we were the promoters of their development and of their lives in the North East. They will be able to say that we've helped them become socially integrated.

People will promote us as one of the best CIC from the North East supporting Eastern Europeans and beyond!

George can be contacted at:  
george@durabilitynorth.co.uk  
www.durabilitynorth.co.uk