My Vote Matters events in Manchester

UKREN together with Migrants Supporting Migrants organised two events in Manchester in May 2014 before the European elections.

The first event, on Sunday 18 May, was a celebration of the benefits that people from other countries have brought to the UK. A further aim of the event was to raise awareness of the European elections and the importance of voting. One of the rooms was decorated with a cartoon about the elections and voter apathy - apart from racists, which the cartoonist Dave Walker kindly agreed to share with us.

More than 80 people from over 20 different nationalities came together at the International Society in Manchester for a sunny afternoon of music, dance, food, short films, quizzes and activities for children; and a sense of community and information on support services for migrants.
The afternoon got off to an energised start with a performance in the garden from DjembeKlan, a fantastic group of musicians who fuse African drumming and House music.

During the show, people were invited to taste some delicious food from Poland, France, Greece and Spain, and coffee from Ethiopia.

The day continued with a performance from Agnieszka, who demonstrated her talent as a flamenco dancer. Other acts included Andrew’s band, who played several English and Irish folk songs; Cesar, a Colombian singer and guitarist who sang beautiful Spanish/Latin American songs and an English student from the Northern School of Music who performed several lieder from Strauss. Anne read a French poem from Charles Baudelaire and Mazen, a
human rights defender from Syria, read some of his own powerful writings. To conclude this lively afternoon, 20 people took part in a traditional Polish dance workshop with Agnieszka, learning and performing a routine.

The day of celebration highlighted the cultural diversity of the UK and the benefits that EU and non-EU migrants have brought and continue to bring to the UK. It was a strong affirmation of how much Manchester values and respects people from all backgrounds. At an individual level there were testimonies of how Manchester had many different communities, but that these communities often remained segregated from each other. In one case the Celebration Day was the first time the participant had mixed with other groups. People became aware of the support services to migrants that Migrants Supporting Migrants offer. Many signed up for further information or offered their voluntary help. The importance of voting and having a voice in a diverse Europe were recurring themes throughout the day with many people saying that they felt empowered to vote and recognised that it was an important duty to ensure a diverse country was largely free of race hate.

The second event, on the evening of Tuesday 20 May, was a Question Time discussion with North West region candidates for the European elections. It was an opportunity for the public to ask them about the race equality, immigration and free movement issues. Some 38 people signed up for the event. Afzal Khan (Labour Party), Deyika Nzeribe (Green Party) and Maria Aretoulaki (Pirate Party) agreed to take part, with the Liberal Democrat candidate having to withdraw due to family illness and the Conservative Party unable to field a candidate in the last week before the election. UKIP were invited but declined to join the discussion.
A live tweet wall ensured that those who were unable to attend could ask questions of the candidates.

The debate started with a discussion on the freedom of movement. A great number of people enjoy this freedom, whether it is to study, to travel or to work. However, it has been a major pre-election issue about limiting migration to the UK. The candidates agreed that the freedom of movement was a fundamental principle of the European Union and that it should not be restricted. Afzal Khan (Labour Party) stated that the number of people going out of the UK was similar to the number of people coming to the UK (around 2.5 million) and that freedom of movement was not a threat but a fantastic opportunity. Maria Aretoulaki (Pirate Party) stated that people born in Britain were more likely to claim benefits than European and non-European migrants and said that “Freedom of movement is a non-issue.” She also reminded the audience of the excellent work the European Union has done in peace-building between states in conflict. Deyika Nzeribe (Green Party) criticised the scapegoating of migrants and added that “There is no rush of immigrants to the UK”.

Afzal Khan (Labour Party) stated that there was a real inequality of wealth distribution across the globe, leading to an increase in immigration. He assured the audience that fairness was at the heart of Labour policy. Maria Aretoulaki (Pirate Party) and Deyika Nzeribe (Green Party) mentioned that migration was linked to climate change. Deyika Nzeribe (Green Party) stated that “when seasons disappear, food disappears and people have to leave their countries in order to sustain themselves. People are already suffering from climate change and this will be one of the major causes of migration in the near future.”

On the issue of the scapegoating of migrants, Afzal Khan (Labour Party) mentioned the existence of a real problem with the media: “the media only want to sensationalise stories, so that they can get more viewers, so that they can sell more newspapers. There is no point
doing that, we need to see migration as a chance and celebrate the contribution of migrants to the UK.”

All three candidates agreed that UKIP and BNP were fundamentally wrong in trying to blame migrants for the employment crisis across Europe and in the UK. Deyika Nzeribe (Green Party) stated that most people in the UK are not racists, however xenophobia currently seemed to be in fashion: “All we hear is that immigrants take British jobs: but what exactly is a British job?!”

Maria Aretoulaki (Pirate Party) mentioned the need to publicise relevant data so that UKIP would be forced to stop making up immigration statistics: “when UKIP says that 75% of our laws are made in Brussels, they are lying. We need to publicise all available data so that people can benefit from accurate information”. Afzal Khan (Labour Party) agreed and stated that “if 75% of our laws are made in Brussels, we need to get rid of 75% of our MPs!”. Deyika Nzeribe (Green Party) reminded the audience of the importance of human rights, which are constantly being attacked, whether by UKIP or by the Conservatives: “Politicians are trying to get rid of our human rights, but human rights are a good thing!”

The audience had some interesting things to say and questions to ask. One was about voters’ disengagement, which is a major issue. A member of the audience stated that “Farage is stealing the debate: migration is not the issue and that debate needs to be turned. The main parties need to say something about migration but they remain silent. Britain is a multi-ethnic society and diversity should be seen as a chance, we should all embrace it”.

A member of the audience mentioned the problem of the involvement of young people in the EU, stating that “the younger generation, particularly from deprived areas like Moss Side, is not aware of the EU’s impact on their lives, especially young people from poorer backgrounds. Politicians need to raise awareness of the European Union and its positive impact on young people’s lives.”

Deyika Nzeribe (Green Party) reminded the audience of the importance of the EU funding for Manchester: “In terms of housing, for example, the EU money saved Manchester and it is good to remember that before criticizing Europe”. He added that “we need to be more optimistic about Europe – it’s a great continent even if it’s not perfect. We can and need to do more to support migrants.” Afzal Khan (Labour Party) agreed on that point, stating that “the EU is not perfect but we get so many benefits out of it!”
Maria Aretoulaki (Pirate Party) ended the discussion by making a very important statement: “Not going to vote is the biggest mistake. Every single vote counts – Your vote matters! Please vote!”