

## Roma Support Group – Case Study

**Focus:** Roma children, i.e. what are the issues faced by Roma children that are not faced by other children? What are the unique challenges for this group?

### 1. Roma Support Group (RSG)

The Roma Support Group (RSG) is the only Roma-focused and Roma-led registered charity in London. Since its founding in 1998, the organisation has assisted thousands of Roma refugee and migrant families in London in accessing welfare, housing, education, health and employment, as well as empowering Roma communities through a wide range of frontline advocacy and cultural programmes.

During the last 15 years we have built a wealth of expertise on Roma issues and have become the leading experts in this field. We have developed best models of practice regarding integration and empowerment of Roma communities which has led us to become advisers to governments, statutory and non-statutory agencies nationally and internationally.

**Our beneficiaries** are Roma refugees and migrants mainly from Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania, Romania and the Balkan region, who have been coming to the UK to flee anti-Roma discrimination in their home countries since the mid-1990's.

**Beneficiaries' engagement:** The RSG has been co-founded by Roma asylum-seekers from Czech Republic and Slovakia, who actively participated in every stage of establishing the organisation: from writing the constitution, recruiting and mobilising first volunteers, outsourcing the first operational venue and launching the RSG with its governing document at a community meeting in 1998.

Roma beneficiaries are engaged in the running and managing of the organisation. 54% of the RSG's Management Committee is comprised of Roma Trustees, whose community insight, knowledge and determination help to shape the strategic directions of the organisation.

Roma are employed as staff and contribute their time as volunteers, inspiring other community members. Advocacy, advice, education support, music/ dance classes, football and karate sessions are usually run by Roma professionals, who become role models for children and young people. Furthermore, the RSG continually consults with the Roma community and helps to generate a sense of community ownership over projects and services. They also facilitate a better understanding of the needs, concerns and aspirations of the community, their barriers and the most effective and culturally sensitive ways of overcoming them.

### 2. Roma Refugees and Migrants in London: numbers & immigration status

#### 2.1 Statistical Data:

The number of Roma families in London currently supported by the Roma Support Group is 876 (approx. 5,000 individuals). According to the recent borough spread analysis based on database of our Roma service users: 39.5%

reside in L. B. Newham; 10.7% in L. B. Hammersmith & Fulham; 7.8% in L. B. Waltham Forest; 7.2% in L. B. Haringey; 5.2% in L. B. Enfield; 5.2% in L. B. Redbridge; 5.2% in L. B. Ealing; 4.1% in L. B. Barking & Dagenham; 4.4% in L. B. Brent; 2.4% in L. B. Lambeth; 2.1% in L. B. Croydon; 1.7% in L. B. Tower Hamlet; 1.4% in L. B. Hackney; 3.1% in other London boroughs and outside the capital.) There is very little data available which provides a reliable estimate of Roma living in London and the UK:

- A mapping survey undertaken by European Dialogue for Department for Children, Schools and Families in 2009 estimated the minimum number of Roma in the UK to be 50,000 according to official records; however, community estimates range from 500,000 to 1 million.<sup>i</sup>
- University of Salford's report "Migrant Roma in the UK" (2013) estimated 200,000 Roma living in the UK (in addition to 200,000 English Gypsies and Travellers).<sup>ii</sup>
- 17% of 194,000 Roma refugees and migrants in England and Wales are estimated to live in Greater London (approx. 34,000).<sup>iii</sup>

Notwithstanding the efforts made to estimate the size of Roma refugee and migrant population in Britain, there is a strong awareness amongst the researchers, local authorities, public service providers, NGOs and other stakeholders that all statistical data needs to be treated with uttermost caution as many Roma in the UK do not 'self-ascribe' in any official forms as 'Roma'. This largely stems from the deeply embedded distrust of authorities and systemic discrimination against Roma in the countries of origin.

Furthermore, most Roma do not feel confident that stating their ethnic affiliation will not lead to discrimination in the UK, as they have little evidence of acceptance of their ethnicity and culture by the media, press, schools and other public authorities.

Prior to deleting of approx. 75% services of Travellers Education Support Services (TESS) within Local Education Authorities of 32 London boroughs between 2008-2012, the RSG has collated some statistical information from TESS, which we have partnered with over the years and which until then have been the only local services engaging with Roma children and their families. According to this data:

- 286 Roma children recorded by the TESS in L. B. Newham alongside 13 English Gypsies and 49 Irish Travellers;
- 490 Roma children recorded by TESS in L. B. Waltham Forest alongside 103 English Gypsies and Irish Travellers;
- 163 Roma children recorded by Ethnic Minority Achievement Service (EMAS) in LB Redbridge alongside 31 English Gypsies and Irish Travellers;
- 178 Roma children recorded in Greenwich (alongside 151 Gypsies, Irish, Scottish, and new Travellers)

In total 1,117 Roma children were supported just in four London boroughs in 2011, which is a hugely under-estimated figure considering low self-ascription of Roma children and their parents due to their fear of anti-Roma discrimination and bullying.

Furthermore, due to the closure of majority of TESS in London, there is no reliable data available which could give any approximate idea of numbers of Roma refugee and migrant children and their families in the capital.

**2.2 Immigration status of Roma population in the UK (as based on the RSG's database, February 2012):**

- 25% of our Roma service users have acquired refugee status or Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILF);
- Majority of the Roma children, who arrived in the UK before October 2001, have acquired British Citizenship;
- 65% of our service users, are A8 nationals (Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, and Hungary), who have rights of residence and some of whom have already obtained British Citizenship;
- 10% of our service users are migrants from A2 countries (Bulgaria and Romania).

### **3. Situation of Roma refugee and migrant children in London: barriers and challenges**

*“Many Roma are illiterate, do not speak English and are coming from the most deprived and poor places in Eastern Europe.... These people were rejected by their own countries for centuries. They never had opportunities as others and they were put aside as a problem that no one wants to deal with. Some might be asking: why do they want to live in the UK if they suffer here so much? ... and the answers are: It is easier to struggle in the country where they treat you as a human being. There is a hope and future in the UK because people are being treated as individuals and because their children can have a hope and future!” (Roma activist)*

#### **3.1 Poverty and its impact on Roma children:**

It can be argued that Roma refugees and migrants constitute some of the most destitute and vulnerable strata of the population in the UK. According to the findings from the Operation Golf (an international operation run by police in the UK and Romania for three years until 31<sup>st</sup> December 2010 to eradicate trafficking of Roma children), the most important lesson learnt from this operation was the scale and degree of poverty amongst Roma families in the UK. Out of 80 Roma adults convicted as a result of the Operation Golf in Britain, only 1 was convicted for child trafficking and 79 for benefit fraud, petty crime and begging caused by extreme poverty.<sup>iv</sup>

Over 80% of our beneficiaries experience extreme poverty (or destitution). Our projects, (e.g.: Education Support 2008 – 13, Aspiration Project (2011 – ongoing) have established strong links between Roma families' destitution and their children school attendance and achievements. The most direct way to overcome barriers to Roma children's school attendance is through tackling their destitution, e.g. helping parents with costs of school uniforms, accessing free school meals, etc.

The extreme destitution of Roma, who are A2 nationals, caused by former restrictions put on their economic activities (until January 2014, they could only be self-employed), not only results in educational exclusion but also generates a chain of other problems, such as homelessness, begging (including child begging) and other Child Safeguarding issues. Although since the 1<sup>st</sup> January 2014 all ECEY EU migrants are eligible to work without restrictions, recent changes in welfare system with a restricted access to JSA and housing benefits may result in unintended consequences of increasing the likelihood of working in marginal/ unregulated/ informal areas of economy, and increasing overcrowding issue in private rented sector.<sup>vi</sup>

Our ongoing casework gives evidence that most of beneficiaries experience destitution due to debt, unemployment, financial illiteracy, benefit dependency, as well as homelessness. Forced into segregated special needs education in their home countries, most Roma parents are illiterate and have limited basic skills. Many parents accessing our services are unemployed, hence there is not enough role models for young Roma within their families, which would enable them to build their confidence, raise aspirations and increase their educational attainments.

According to our casework, most Roma parents (those granted refugee status or ILR and A8 nationals), regardless of their entitlements, still experience many problems in accessing the welfare system due to lack of clarity/ transparency of the system, lack of information about their rights, excessive demands for documents, language barriers and outright discriminative attitude of the front-line staff.

The London Child Poverty website outlines the link between poverty and educational attainment. According to the Government's Joint Policy Review of Children and Young People, *"...much research has shown that poorer children have weaker educational attainment and are more likely to end up in poverty in adulthood, with all the associated detrimental impacts on their own children. Families caught in a cycle of low achievement often require high levels of costly support from public services. Without effective early intervention and prevention work, the cycle of disadvantage across the generations will not be broken."*<sup>vii</sup>

The connection between the highest rate of permanent school exclusion in the UK for Roma/ Gypsy children, their worst academic performance and poverty was highlighted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission in its Triennial Review, *"How Fair Is Britain?"*, 2010. The Review emphasised that due to a lack of formal qualifications, low employment and earnings profile, Roma/ Gypsy families are at the highest risk of poverty.

### **3.2 Homelessness:**

Majority (87%) of our Roma service user are homeless, "vulnerably housed" or live in squats. Our services tackle this issue by reducing homelessness amongst Roma families through early and effective intervention and prevention work.

Since 2011, we have noted an increase of new Roma families with young children and/ or unaccompanied young Roma from A2 countries (who are homeless or illegally squatting) being referred to us by Social Services, Police, health agencies and members of public.

Where a homeless Roma family is referred by the Roma Support Group to Local Authorities' Homeless Person Units, temporary accommodation is allocated (prevalence of short-hold tenancies rented by LAs from private sector), which often forces the family to move to a different borough away from their community.

Some LAs (e.g.: L. B. Newham, where many Roma families are based), are currently proposing long term re-housing outside London. This causes forced mobility of Roma families not only from borough to borough but also out of London. This pattern is further exacerbated by exploitation by rogue landlords, leading often to evictions, as well as their fear of (and actual experience of) discrimination, racism and unequal treatment.

Homelessness is the main reason for high mobility of our services users and it leads to difficulties in ensuring effective engagement with statutory services, including access to education. Most of Roma children and their families, who access our services, are forced to move from their accommodations on average once every 2 years. This interrupts the continuity of children's education and their progress in educational attainment by placing them again and again on lengthy waiting lists for new school placements.

This also undermines the efforts already made by former schools to support a Roma child and re-opens a turbulent process of integration with a new school environment.

Moving homes also forces a family back into social exclusion and under the poverty line as considerable time and effort is needed for a family to settle down in a new place, establish links with healthcare services, education, Job Centres and find new employment.

Our projects provide us with a multitude of casework-based examples on how our early intervention and preventative work in addressing homelessness problems of Roma families leads to a wide range of positive outcomes from increasing chances of children to achieve their full potentials in education to tackling issues of unemployment, destitution and health inequalities in Roma families.

### **3.3 Education Inequalities:**

The multi-generational impact of segregated education experienced by Roma children in their countries of origin since the end of WW2 cannot be underestimated in the context of a discussion about the barriers and inequalities faced by Roma children in British schools.

This actual educational apartheid, which is still in practice in many EU Member States, places Roma children in special schools for children with mental health issues or segregated classes where they study according to inferior curriculum.<sup>viii</sup> They leave these schools unprepared for life in a democratic society and participation in competitive labour market. They are stigmatised and denied the right to education on equal terms, which leads them to further social exclusion and isolation.

Although the European Court of Human Rights has affirmed that school segregation of Roma children constitutes illegal discrimination in judgments against Czech Republic (2007), Greece (2008) and Croatia (2010), educational segregation of Roma children is still systemic in many European countries.

Most Roma parents, whom we work with, are victims of this apartheid educational system, which had a profound effect on some of them by undermining their trust to school authorities, educational psychologists and generating low self-esteem, as well as a lack of confidence in the value of education and its positive role in the process of personal development and empowerment of their children. For some Roma parents this system led to their decision to migrate in pursuit of a better life and equal opportunities for their children particularly in the field of education.

Notwithstanding efforts that many Roma children make to benefit from formal education and achieve academically, theirs or their parents' previous experience of education, as well as their current high mobility, destitution, discrimination, health issues, teachers' inability to understand their situation, culture and needs, may inform their current relationship with schools.

Therefore, despite a number of positive examples and successes, Roma children (perceived as part of Gypsy, Roma, Travellers - GRT children) have the lowest school achievement in the UK with only 3% of young Roma completing GCSE exams.<sup>ix</sup> The gap between these children's GCSE's results and the national average is over 46%. Roma/ Gypsy children also have the highest level of permanent and fixed period exclusion in the country (0.56% and 18.71% of total school population respectively).

EHRC has highlighted the educational attainment of Gypsy/ Roma/ Travellers as the area of "known inequalities" alongside disabled people's access to public transport, the gender pay gap and racist and homophobic bullying in schools in its "Equality Impact Assessment Guidance", 2009.

Despite the official data about the lowest school attainment of Roma children, most Traveller Education Support Services (TESS) in London were closed. Newham TESS was closed in April 2011; Waltham Forest TESS in April 2012, followed by London Boroughs of Greenwich, Bexley, Kingston-Upon-Thames, Lambeth, Lewisham, Southwark, which all abolished their TESS without any support services replacing it. More than 75% of Travellers Education Support Services in London have been terminated and in boroughs where the service continues TESS frontline staff has been halved, making London the worst affected region in England and leaving Roma children and young people in London more vulnerable than ever. However, notwithstanding the fact that the attainment gap for Gypsy, Roma, Traveller (GRT) pupils is wider than for any other ethnic group in the UK, 2010 DfE data illustrated that fewer than 50% of this group are currently claiming Free School Meals (FSM).<sup>x</sup> A significant proportion of Roma children with low educational attainment and living in extreme poverty, are not entitled to FSM (and by extension to the Pupil Premium), which furthers their educational disadvantages. According to our data, in some boroughs (e.g. Redbridge, Waltham Forest, Haringey) over 70% Roma refugee and migrant children are not eligible for FSM and Pupils Premium.

Furthermore, Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) is replaced by 16-19 Bursaries that most of young Roma are not eligible for, despite of their extremely deprived backgrounds. This will affect their access to further education due to the fact that most of them enrol on practical courses, which require purchase of their

own equipment. Although there is supposed to be a discretionary element to the fund, which colleges can provide according to their own criteria, we are concerned that most of young Roma are not able to access it.

Similarly, cuts in legal aid related to education include all aspects, i.e. appeals against exclusions, admissions, SEN, bullying and disability discrimination. This makes educational advocacy support for underperforming and underprivileged Roma children and young people, more urgent than ever.

### **3.4 Health Inequalities:**

The Marmot Review 2010 – *Fair Society, Healthy Lives* highlighted that tackling health inequalities is a matter of social justice, with real economic benefits and savings. *“Common social determinants of poorer health include poverty, poor housing conditions, unemployment, social isolation and overt discrimination. Some communities within the protected equalities groups are more likely to suffer from higher incidents of the above determinants.”*

Roma refugees and migrants endure health inequalities as part of Gypsy and Traveller communities and as refugees and migrants. They have the worst health status and the lowest average life expectancy in Britain.<sup>xi</sup>

According to evidence collected by the Roma Support Group since 2005 through our health-focused projects and researches (delivered in collaboration with the NHS), over 60% of our adult beneficiaries suffer one or a combination of many of the following physical health conditions: cancer, diabetes, MS, asthma, epilepsy, hepatitis B, cardiovascular and respiratory ailments, etc. Many of our young beneficiaries are diagnosed with autism, ADHD, learning disabilities, obesity and cardiac illnesses.

According to our casework, 40% out of 60% of Roma adults and children with long term physical health conditions have severe mental health issues due to destitution, homelessness and persistent discrimination experienced in their home countries and in the UK. Their mental health issues include depression, personality disorder, suicidal tendencies, self-abuse, and dependency/ misuse of drugs. Both, mental health issues and drug misuse are treated by the community as a taboo and stigma, which is deepened by their lack of knowledge about relevant health services. Our collaboration with specialist drug misuse services, revealed increasing usage of class A drugs (i.e. crack and heroin) amongst young Roma from 13 years of age, which is compounded with their poor mental health and lack of academic expectations.<sup>xii</sup>

Our joint work with the NHS established poor health outcomes and evidenced lack of engagement in preventative health, e.g. low uptake of child immunisation, late diagnosis of cancer, low uptake of TB screening, acute problems with GP registrations for Roma children and their families. Our work and official data (e.g. Baseline Audit report for NE London, 2006) provides evidence that GPs often do not register Roma/ Gypsies or refuse treatment. There is also evidence that GPs and health professionals have a poor understanding of the cultural and health needs of Roma migrant communities.

Recent re-structuring of NHS services led to closure of many vital services, which supported Roma children and their parents' access to health services. The recent (since April' 14) closure of bi-lingual health advocacy in Newham, which is the

borough with the most recent and ethnically diverse population in the UK<sup>xiii</sup>, will not only magnify health inequalities for Roma families but in most cases lead to their health exclusion.

It will also have an enormous impact on the life of many young Roma, who will need to accompany their parents and other family members to local GP surgeries to interpret for them, thus missing out on school attendance in order to deliver this much needed support. This is a task far beyond their age and mental strength and there is no better way to illustrate this pressure that young Roma experience than referring to the testimony from one of our former beneficiaries: *"I spent most of my teen life as a translator for my family, who did not speak a word of English and were unfamiliar with the local culture and 'norms'. Their language barrier meant that I was always expected to be available to attend appointments with them. This had a major effect on me as I missed out on a lot of things that normal teenagers did. It felt like I had to carry their problems on my shoulders which at times I felt was unfair. However, there was no one else to help them out; I felt responsible. I was the only person in my family who spoke English. How could I not help them out?"*

*I constantly began to worry about my family's troubles and the difficulties they experienced. It began to affect me more than I realised at the time. I felt different... The pressure I felt enveloped me in a tight grasp. I couldn't concentrate at school and my behaviour and attitude towards learning became increasingly negative. During the summer holidays it was always the same. More appointments, form filling, translation...At time I felt I had just had enough ☹."*

### **3.5 Hate Crime:**

Although reports of racist attacks in London rose by 7% in the past four years, reporting and monitoring race hate crime against Roma in the UK is still in its embryonic phase due to mutual mistrust of Roma community and police, as well as a lack of local initiatives to help Roma residents in London to overcome their fear to report hate crime.

The report published by the National Migration Group commissioned by the UK Border Agency<sup>xiv</sup>, highlighted that the information available in the UK about Roma refugees and migrants are largely negative and anecdotal. This leads to the danger of making generalisations about these communities informed by negative impressions, which are easily exacerbated by parts of the media and lead to major social tension.

Police reports, which are related to anti-Roma incidents stress that most of them began with hostile and inaccurate press reports, where Roma were labelled as undesirable group and unwelcomed migrants.

Recent (October' 13 – January' 14) excesses of Romaphobia in press and media had serious implications on increased levels of anti-Roma discrimination and bullying in schools as perceived by our service users. A Roma woman (a resident of L. B. Newham) told us about being spat on and verbally abused by a car driver while crossing the road with her children. Young Roma from secondary schools in East London reported being under constant verbal attack from other pupils, who abuse them and tell them to *"f...off and go back to their own country"*.

Our on-going work addresses issues of anti-Roma discrimination in neighbourhood and bullying in schools through organising activities and cultural events for Roma and non-Roma children, individual advocacy, Roma Culture workshops, and training seminars for teachers and police officers. Nevertheless, over 70% of Roma children and young people tell us about their fear to declare their Roma ethnicity in schools.

The DfE Gypsy, Roma, Traveller Stakeholders Group identified in their evidence to the Children's Commissioner's School Exclusion Inquiry that the two most important factors, which influence schools' decisions to exclude GRT children, are:

*" 1. Schools often don't recognise the racist abuse and bullying many of our children experience; telling a member of staff is rarely effective and can make the abuse worse.*

*2. Schools regard physical violence as more serious than verbal abuse but our children have to put up with abuse, day in, day out. If they snap once, it is they who get excluded."*

It is only due to years of dedicated work that these attitudes begin to change for some of the children, who are beneficiaries of our projects. A group of young Roma, who took part in a Forum Theatre in 2011-12, decided to base the "scenario" of the play on their own experience of bullying in schools. They found a creative process of producing and enacting "scenes" to be an empowering method of sharing their own experience while modifying it with positive solutions. Facing many challenges in schools, a group of assertive young Roma in Newham with their first-hand awareness of where schools tend to fail them, started to collate "Young Roma Guidelines for Teachers", which include the following precepts:

- ✓ *"React when Gypsy/Roma children in your school are called discriminatory names."*
- ✓ *"Do not allow negative talk about Gypsy, Roma, Travellers."*
- ✓ *"Know what you teach and learn about Roma culture/ history and do not perpetrate a negative, stereotypical view about Roma/ Gypsy people."*

There is recognition of anti-Gypsy/ Roma hate crime problem on the highest governmental level. The Home Office's officials, who participate in the Ministerial Working Group on Gypsies and Travellers, have identified a need for promoting better recording and reporting of hate crime against Gypsy and Traveller communities. There is also a commitment to develop a new cross-governmental hate crime action plan, which will highlight proposals for addressing the specific challenges of hate crime against these communities, including Roma.

### **3.6 Safeguarding Roma Children:**

One of the most important findings, which our consultancy and training work in London and across the UK has revealed, is the need for national action to safeguard and promote the welfare of vulnerable Roma children and young people.

For many years the RSG's staff has been directly involved in advocating Roma children and families including support with Child Protection conferences,

assessments, Child Protection Plans, as well as being contracted by Children Services to make assessments of Roma children and young people on Child Protection Register and co-delivering parenting classes.

Since 2011, all our training sessions as well as forum meetings in London and other regions have included safeguarding issues in their agenda. Furthermore, over 80% of the RSG's consultancy and expert advice relate to enhancing local authorities' understanding of Roma children and young people's safeguarding needs in the context of their culture and community dynamics, while ensuring an effective early intervention if necessary.

There is absence of public discourse and limited resources highlighting the reasons for social exclusion of some Roma migrant families, who have been treated in their countries of origin as the second class citizens and the best models of practice on how to engage and empower them.

According to the DfE's data on numbers of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children going into local authority care over the past few years, their numbers have increased from 30 in 2009 to 120 in 2012.

This problem has frequently been highlighted by officials from local authorities, who participate in the National Roma Network led by Leeds City Council (Roma Matrix)<sup>xv</sup>. The official minutes of the meeting (06/02/13) recorded:

*"The issues of Roma children being taken into care was raised again. It continues to cause issues in local authority areas and members reported that Roma families were living in fear. The issues seem to stem from the criteria that social services use to determine whether a child is at risk and it was felt that the criteria were inflexible and do not take into account the cultural difference of Roma families."*

<sup>xvi</sup>

Through our direct casework and our close links with Roma communities, we have observed that safeguarding issues are also compounded with Roma parents' limited understanding of how Children's Services work. This lack of awareness was exploited in 2012 by Slovak/ Czech media, causing Roma parents' panic and protests with organised demonstrations across the UK.

#### **4. What challenges do we face as an organisation when supporting Roma children and their families?**

##### **4.1 Exclusion, Harassment and Discrimination:**

All organisations and individuals working with Roma/ Gypsy/ Traveller communities have experienced exclusion and direct discrimination at some points of their work and the Roma Support Group is no different in this respect.

The co-founder of the RSG and the author of this report has been frequently told verbally or in writing to find a 'proper' job, 'go back to wherever you came from', 'f... off', etc. There are occasions when our trainers are attacked in public for 'telling lies' and our advocacy workers feel that their professionalism is undermined or questioned.

Hate mail, although now increasingly sent in electronic form, is still the main reason for the RSG to continue to use a P.O. Box and be discrete about their operational address.

Media harassment is another reason for the RSG not to advertise venues of our community events through public outlets at times of high intensity of press and

media attack. The case of a Roma child in Greece (“Maria’s case”) in October’ 13, as well as media hysteria caused by Mr Blunkett, MPs’ alleged “quote” in November’ 13 and immigration changes for A2 nationals triggered an avalanche of phone calls and emails (over 800 within 3 months) placing us under enormous pressure of unrealistic demands, fuelled by Romaphobia and not on investigative, rational and objective journalism. In order to avoid this negative attention, which could consequently undermine the safety of Roma community members, the RSG was forced last year to remove the address of our Annual General Meeting from our website, which coincided with media driven anti-Roma hysteria.

The search for accommodations to host community activities has also been challenging in the past as most centres, which initially expressed their interest to let us space, would change their mind once they found out what community we are working with.

#### **4.2 Lack of engagement with LAs in London and unpopularity of our work:**

One of the most important challenges, which we face as an organisation is our inability to effectively engage with local authorities in London to engage them in the delivery of services which would be culturally sensitive and positively addressing some of the barriers faced by Roma children and their families.

Due to a general lack of officially recorded conclusive statistical data on Roma in all London boroughs caused by inability of LAs to capture this data and fear of discrimination felt by Roma residents to self-ascribe as Roma, numbers of Roma in respective boroughs are largely under-reported and ‘invisible’, which is used by LAs as a justification for not engaging and not funding services targeting Roma residents.

#### **5.1 The Roma Support Group - Model of practice:**

The Roma Support Group was co-founded by Roma people and it is led by them today. Setting up and running of the organisation is an exercise of community empowerment. Roma are engaged as Trustees, workers and volunteers, ensuring their right to inform and be informed.

The cornerstone of our approach and the key to our success is our ability to establish and maintain trust with Roma children, their families and communities. Building a trust-based relationship stems from having respect for our clients and their culture, as well as compassion and understanding of their problems and needs.

Another vital aspect of our approach is to appreciate, participate and promote Roma culture and history. As workers we believe that we could never understand the Roma children’s situation now without understanding their heritage and painful past.

In our work we use a person-centred, holistic approach. Roma families often have very complex and multiple needs ranging from welfare, housing, health, education and employment issues. We believe that it is not possible to address any of these problems in isolation from each other. So when, for example, the problem is related to a Roma child’s poor school attendance, we look at poverty, housing and health related issues within the family to understand and help them overcome any barriers.

This person-centred approach looks beyond the presented problem, and seeks to address the underlying causes by working collectively within the organisation, as well as collaboratively with external agencies to address complex needs that many Roma children face.

It is also important for us to engage with the whole family, not just individuals so that we promote dialogue with all family members and help establish a self-help network.

Working with Roma also means that we need to help them understand the value of education, which they have been deprived of in their home countries. We, therefore, run Education Support and Aspiration Projects, which advocate for Roma children's needs in schools and help to establish a dialogue between parents and teachers.

Our Aspiration Project also helps Roma children to develop their interests and talents. We involve Roma professionals, such as: a karate teacher and football coach, who became role models for young people and train them to develop their skills and achieve.

S. Kierpacz, who himself is a karate champion, has inspired and trained hundreds of Roma children, many of whom won endless karate competitions and championships.



D. Siwak, who joined our sport activities 13 years ago as a child, now coaches new generations of young Roma to fulfil their potentials through football.



One of our main aims is to promote Roma culture, history and arts, while challenging stereotypes and anti-Roma discrimination. From the very beginning of the organisation, our Roma colleagues wanted to make a cultural contribution and looked for ways to express themselves through their culture and art. This work has engaged thousands of Roma and non-Roma people in a dialogue, which aims to build cultural bridges between the Roma community and British society. This cultural 'politics' of the RSG was not a strategic choice but an organic development, which sprang from the Roma people's need to be heard on their terms and to affirm their presence through cultural contribution and self-representation. One of our young Roma dancers observed:  
*"I dance so other people can learn about and appreciate Roma culture."*



15 years of our history has been filled with cultural and art achievements, such as: festivals, concerts, musicals, talent shows, drama and dance workshops.



Thanks to our experience of working with Roma communities in Britain for so many years, we are recognised as experts in this field and as such we utilise our expertise to teach other professionals how to engage and work with their Roma

clients. Only last year we have directly supported over 1,000 professionals through the delivery of our training sessions which indirectly supported over 21,000 Roma families in the UK.

## **5.2 Other Models of Practice:**

While it is worth to note that other than the RSG, most of Roma-focussed good practice from statutory and voluntary sectors are located outside of London, there are still some London-based examples, which have stood up to the test of time:

- a) London, Children Society – “New Londoners – The Roma/ New Migrants Project-** advice and advocacy for Roma children, young people and their families in East London on educational and health issues; social and art activities for children; group workshops on healthy living and education; advice/ consultation on issues facing the Roma community;
- b) London, FPWP Hibiscus –** Roma Women Project is funded by Ministry of Justice since June 2011 to prevent re-offending of the vulnerable Roma women; support access to training, employment and benefits; support the Roma integration in London. Outcomes include: (i) reduced numbers of re-offending clients; (ii) Roma women are more socially integrated and benefit from a support network; (iii) enhanced independency of Roma women and their self-sufficiency;
- c) Youth Offending Service in L. B. Haringey –** commissioning the RSG to deliver group activities for young Roma female offenders.
- d) Refugee and Migrant Forum in Essex and London (RAMFEL) –** offering advice and support for Roma migrants in L. B. Redbridge;
- e) Ethnic Minority Advisory Team in L. B. Redbridge –** offering parent-school mediation service and supporting Roma children in local schools;
- f) Travellers Education Service (Hackney Learning Trust) in L. B. Hackney –** organising local events to celebrate Gypsy, Roma, Traveller History Month.

**For more information contact:** and1orsyl1@aol.com

- <sup>i</sup> *The Movement of Roma from New EU Member States: A mapping survey of A2 and A8 Roma in England*, commissioned by DCSF, European Dialogue, 2009
- <sup>ii</sup> *Migrant Roma in the United Kingdom: population size and experiences of local authorities and partners*, University of Salford, Manchester, October 2013
- <sup>iii</sup> [http://www.salford.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/363118/Migrant\\_Roma\\_in\\_the\\_UK\\_finalreport\\_October\\_2013.pdf](http://www.salford.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0004/363118/Migrant_Roma_in_the_UK_finalreport_October_2013.pdf).
- <sup>iv</sup> Roma Children Safeguarding Conference, Nottingham, 1<sup>st</sup> February, 2012; meeting with Chief Inspector Colin Carswell, Operation Golf, UK/Romania Joint Initiative Team, RSG office, 05/03/12
- <sup>v</sup> East, Central European (ECE)
- <sup>vi</sup> Business, Innovation, Skills – Skills and Adult Learning, Social Disadvantage Team, Workshop, 14<sup>th</sup> March 2014, London-Sheffield-Coventry
- <sup>vii</sup> [www.londonchildpoverty.org.uk/docs/cmereport.pdf](http://www.londonchildpoverty.org.uk/docs/cmereport.pdf)
- <sup>viii</sup> According to the report by Equality, 85% of all the Roma pupils interviewed (51 respondents) had been previously placed in special (de facto segregated Roma schools in Czech Republic and Slovakia. The same children, some of whom had minor hearing or sight problems, speech impediments or other learning difficulties, were studying in mainstream schools in the UK. *“From Segregation to Inclusion: Roma Pupils in the UK”*, A Pilot Research Project, Equality, 2011.
- <sup>ix</sup> The lowest educational attainment and the highest permanent school exclusion rate in the UK is highlighted and documented in the *“Progress Report by The Ministerial Working Group on Tackling Inequalities Experienced by Gypsies and Travellers”*, DCLG, April 2012; *“Comments of the Government of the UK on the Implementation of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities by the United Kingdom”*, January 2012; *“Creating the Conditions for Integration”*, DCLG, February 2012; the Equality & Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in its Triennial Review, *“How Fair Is Britain?”*, 2010; Schools Minister’s letters to Directors of Children Trusts, 2006-07; National Statistics, DCSF, 2009; *“The Importance of Teaching”*, ROTA, 2010
- <sup>x</sup> Statistical First Release on Schools, Pupils and their Characteristics, 22.06.2011 at <http://www.education.gov.uk/rsgateway/DB/SFR/s001012/index.shtml>
- <sup>xi</sup> EHRC Triennial Review, 2010
- <sup>xii</sup> For more information, please see: *Children of Roma*, R. Winyard, D. Felja, Druglink Vol 25 Issue 6 November/December 2010
- <sup>xiii</sup> *“Ethnic Mixing in Newham”*, S. Jivrai, Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity (CoDE), October, 2013; *“Geographies of Diversity in Newham”*, S. Jivrai, Centre on Dynamics of Ethnicity (CoDE), October, 2013
- <sup>xiv</sup> *First Impressions: Roma in the UK, Profile and Needs – Impact and Response*, National Migration Group, January 2011
- <sup>xv</sup> LAs taking part in the meetings of the National Roma Network include Derby City Council, Glasgow City Council, Liverpool City Council, Manchester City Council, Newcastle City Council, Leeds City Council, Salford City Council, Peterborough City Council, Leicester City Council, etc. There has been no representative from any London Boroughs attending meetings of the National Roma Network since its beginning in September 2012.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Minutes, National Roma Network, 06/02/2013, Town Hall, Leeds
- [http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma\\_uk\\_strategy\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/justice/discrimination/files/roma_uk_strategy_en.pdf)

**APPENDIX 1 Out-of-London models of good practice** (based mainly on email responses to our call for examples of good practice, March-May' 12, as well as more recent newsletters by Roma Matrix – September' 13 and January' 14) :

- **Bolton Roma Support Group (BRSB)** – is run by Roma community members delivering advice and organising cultural activities;
- **Bolton Council** – running a year session on dance, oral histories and costume making with young Roma people culminating in an event in GRT History Month; publishing *“Raising Eastern European Gypsy/ Roma Achievement: A Guide for Educational Practitioners”*;
- **Bristol: A Roma Drop-in Service** – is led by Bristol Council and provides access to health, adult education, advice and guidance including debt advice, ESOL classes, and employment issues. The service involves a range of partners and was established to take services to the Roma community as they were not accessing mainstream services;
- **Cardiff, Ethnic Minority Communities Programme** – produced a community needs analysis of EU Roma Communities in Cardiff in April 2011, the first of its kind in Wales;
- **Glasgow Police** – a Diversity Liaison Officer is involved in providing a wide range of diversionary activities set up specifically for the Roma community;
- **Glasgow Practitioners Group** - was founded to meet crisis needs; developing an understanding of the culture of the incoming Roma population; raising awareness of their needs; promote partnership working; building capacity amongst the community to help them to articulate their opinions in the planning and developing of local services; two health visitors were appointed to work specifically with the Roma community;
- **Glasgow Housing Services** – Drop in sessions supported by Slovakian-speaking Housing Officer, a neighbourhood management partnership group was established to tackle improvements in housing, pest infestation, landlord registration, etc.;
- **Glasgow City Council** has an ambitious programme to develop entrepreneurship skills in young Roma living in the city. This will be supported by targeted engagement with potential employers. Glasgow is also developing its scheme to provide mentoring opportunities for Roma people with public authorities. These will be combined with employment opportunities, training and language support. Glasgow is also working with

Roma groups in the City, to promote positive images of Roma in the run-up to International Roma Day in April 2014

- **Gloucester, the Race Equality and Diversity Service** – producing a school handbook to help schools provide appropriate welcome packages; communication advice on Roma history, culture and language; organising Youth Forums, with individual learning packages to encourage students to pursue GCSEs;
- **Kent Police** - Police Community Support Officer has been working closely with the Roma community in Medway for the past two years, initiating a number of projects with Czech and Slovak young Roma people, their families, the indigenous population and more settled communities. Issues faced include: Integration, Social Inclusion and Anti-Social Behaviour. One of the particularly successful projects, funded by The Kent People's Trust, is the 'Fighting Chance Inclusion Judo Project'. For most Roma participation in this project and belonging to a local sport club is the first time that they are given an opportunity to gain social skills outside their predominantly Roma environment; a chance to gain recognition for their commitment and efforts; develop friendships with local youth that paves the way for community cohesion. Another project supported by the same funder, as well as Kent Police, Kent Fire & Rescue Service and Medway Council is the 'Youth Integration Programme Medway', which outreaches and engages Roma young people and others from disadvantaged backgrounds in positive activities. Young people develop their sporting skills, team work and are awarded with the equivalent of BTEC qualification. The project emphasises sustainability of positive life choices made by the participants while achieving other positive outcomes, including better engagement with Roma families; increased understanding of Roma needs by local service providers, which enables them to signpost families to relevant agencies for vital support. *"... We are merely scratching the surface of many of the issues and needs of Roma families in Medway...."* (R. D., Roma Liaison & Integration Officer);
- **South Kent Police** – a Roma Drop in Centre has been operating at a local school;
- **Leicester, Citizens Advice Bureau** – Drop in sessions for Slovakian Roma;
- **Leicester** – a "Market Place" event was held to increase communication between Roma families and Education, Housing, Health, Benefits and Police; two Roma ambassadors were recruited, needs were assessed and confidence in services improved

- **Luton, Roma Church**, Chaplain to the Gypsies, Travellers and Roma for the Diocese of St. Alban's – supports Romanian Roma community to settle down and integrate in the UK. This work is funded The Allder Trust and Luton & Bedfordshire Community Foundation;
- **Manchester, BHA Routes Project** – funded by Manchester City Council and supported approx. 220 Roma families (mainly from Romania) from May'10 till October'11 delivering holistic family support ensuring access to all universal services, such as health and education; support to access more specialist services; developing the teaching pack to support educators in teaching students about the history and heritage of Roma people; partnership work with Liverpool and Salford City Councils to develop collaboration and protocols for sharing evidenced approaches. Work in schools included: (i) supporting Roma children into work-based placements; (ii) delivering Romani heritage sessions to Roma and non-Romani pupils; (iii) commissioning Work Solutions to deliver 10-week course including basic skills, ESOL, etc. Other activities included: supporting Roma to access sustainable employment (funded by Migration Impact Fund); establishing Community Interpreting Project which provided opportunities for self-employment within Family Support Services and within educational settings. The main outcomes of these projects are: a) reduced social isolation of Roma families; b/ improved UK's cultural knowledge and understanding ; c) increased Roma awareness of their rights, options and responsibilities; d) increased self-confidence/ self-esteem; e) improved relationships; f) increased personal resilience; g) improved behaviour of young people; h) decreased family conflict; i) improved community relationship;
- **Manchester City Council, Children's Services, International New Arrivals, Travellers and Supplementary Schools Team** – working in partnership with schools and other agencies to address the needs of Roma children and their families in a holistic way; supporting access to education; ensuring successful school induction; signposting to other services, reported success in attendance and attainment of 200 Roma children in schools; employing two Roma Teaching Assistants; meaningful community dialogue has been established (for more information this work, please see *What's Working: conversations with Manchester's Romanian Roma community living in Longsight and Levenshulme*, Manchester City Council, Children Services, 2010);
- **Migration Yorkshire** – training Roma Women Health Mediators and delivering workshops for Roma communities to raise awareness about hate crime and Roma rights in the UK;

- **Peterborough, Cambridgeshire Constabulary Peterborough District, COMPAS** – community cohesion activities with Roma communities, planning stage of the project's development; Aims: better understanding of Roma community in Peterborough; improving service provision and community relations; better education, employment, housing, community cohesion among Roma community. The project will benefit 3,000 Roma residents of Peterborough;
- **Roma Matrix** – managing the UK National Roma Network since September 2013, which facilitates discussions between local authorities, national government and other stakeholders about Roma issues in the UK;
- **Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council** - All services provided are mainstreamed and funded by LA. All work and projects are aimed at supporting Roma integration through education, health and support to assist with language development and access to services, improved health and safeguarding of children and young people. Community Cohesion is a priority to reduce tensions where Roma reside alongside other communities. Roma population in Rotherham is estimated to be approx. 2 - 3,000. Approximately 339 children are registered in schools.

Rotherham Council is helping young people in the town's Roma community to see a brighter future. The Pathway to Employment project was launched in November 2013, in partnership with local organisations, to increase the employment prospects of young Roma people, aged 15-16 by providing skills and guidance. The first Pathway to Employment project welcomed 34 students from local secondary schools.

- **Sheffield, Roma grass-root initiative** – a voluntary initiative supporting Czech and Slovak Roma, who are residents of Sheffield, through information, language support, advocacy, school registrations, schools-parents liaison, organising parents meetings, supporting pupils to attain in schools, distribution of second-hand clothes, etc.
- **Slough Music Service, Chalvey Music Project** – Music activities funded by Youth Music and Slough Borough Council, targeted at Roma children and families (KS2 and early years programme). The project aims to a) develop integration through music making between the Roma community and other ethnic and resident groups in Chalvey, enhancing integration and cohesion; b) to enable Roma community (up to age 18) to express and develop their music skills; c) to develop links between young people in schools and NEETs in the community to promote school attendance and employment

opportunities; d) to develop youth leadership through a music programme; e) to develop the adult workforce, both in schools and in the community for sustainable music delivery;

- **Southend Borough Council, Central Library in Southend-on-Sea** – weekly advice and information drop-in sessions in relation to Housing, transport, NHS, School Admission, debt and any type documentation query for Polish and Roma communities; organising cultural and art events in collaboration with other partners;
- **South East** - Roma community workers are supported to work in schools and some schools set up opportunities for community engagement through coffee mornings, after school clubs and consultations to seek community views. Schools also share best practice through networking meetings and produced an induction booklet for new arrivals.



**Case study:** Nadia is 12 years old and her brother, Rico is 10.

Their parents (Polish Roma) came to the UK in 1999 following years of fear and threat caused by racist attacks by skinheads, physical violence and verbal abuse by “ordinary” people on the streets, in public transport and at home. *‘There were times when 30-40 Roma families got together in one flat for protection because we could not rely on police to help us.’* – remembered Nadia’s mother – *‘Police often colluded with hooligans and skinheads and we were repeatedly told by them that “we got what we’ve deserved”’. Before football matches police used to round up all our men and detain them “to protect us from skinheads”. Women and children were left to their own devices. It was very frightening...’* Nadia’s parents and their two elder daughters left Poland after their ground floor flat was burnt by a Molotov cocktail explosive thrown through their window. The curtains burnt fast and the scars left on their bodies bear evidence to what had happened and what cannot be forgotten.

But Nadia and Rico do not share these memories; they were born in democratic England. “Nadia” means hope. Their mother is tearful with gratitude to the British government at the time for accepting their asylum claim and allowing the whole family refugee status. She is particularly impressed with the democratic instruments of power and decision making. She often watches parliamentary debates on the

TV and although she does not fully understand them, she waits for her children to come home from their school to explain. And she admires the Queen. Her love to the British monarch has been passed down to her youngest child, Rico, who not only writes letters to Her Majesty but occasionally receives a reply: *'Her Majesty was particularly interested to hear about your wish and ambition to help other people when you are older [as a Prime Minister].'* Not many children in Britain can look forward to receiving a white envelope with an embossed mark of 'Buckingham Palace' but Rico can; he has a very special "pen-friend".

Although born in the UK, Nadia and Rico have faced many obstacles to accessing education. This has been mainly due to living in temporary accommodations and being "carers" and interpreters for their parents. Their mother is terminally ill with cancer while father is partially deaf and blind.

The family has moved 7 times from one private short-hold tenancy to another crossing the boundaries of four local authorities to and fro: Barking and Dagenham, Redbridge, Newham and Waltham Forest. Mother says that she could write volumes about exploitative landlords. *'Once, when I had no money at all, I painted our sitting room and kitchen with my husband's shaving brush. You get a place in a horrific state and as soon as you make it look respectable, you receive notice to quit. Landlords get their houses decorated for free and then push the rent up or sell the property.'*

Each move is very traumatic for Nadia's mother, causing not only the change of the family's GP but also cancellation of her cancer treatment. Furthermore, the change of address cause problems with their welfare benefits, which are often stopped, leaving the family with no financial means for weeks on end in total destitution. All of this puts an incredible strain on the family and requires many months of collaborative work between the Roma Support Group and a local MP to re-instate the family's access to the welfare system.

The lack of language support in local services, such as Homeless Persons Unit or GPs repeatedly forced Nadia to be absent from school to assist her mother and father with their visits to local service providers. Nadia remembers well one Housing Officer, unable to understand that a 10 year old child might not be capable to understand all professional jargon and procedures. *'She raised her voice and started shouting at me ordering me to be faster and translate better. I was scared and asked her: 'Why do you shout at me? I am only 10.'*

Mother remembers that before every move the family has to go to the Homeless Persons Unit to wait for housing allocation every day for many days. *'Waiting a whole day in the lobby with a family can be very challenging, especially with small*

*children. My medications also make me feel very tired. But I never complain – why not? - once I did and the Housing Officer told me to go back to my own country. The only problem is that we, Roma, do not have “our own” country to go back to. It is sad to be told things like that in front of my children. I came here to protect them from racism but it seems that we somehow can't escape it.'*

But Nadia's mother cannot afford self-pity; she is fighting not only for her own family but also campaigning for others: *'Although we may need some help now and again, this does not mean that we are sub-human. You should not be treated condescendingly just because you need help and feel vulnerable. All it takes is a little bit of compassion, understanding and tolerance!'*

Due to the family's unstable housing situation, the children have attended 5 schools in the last 3 years with long gaps in their education during these transition periods. Although they were always very anxious about new schools' environment, both of them love their present school and often bring “star of the week” awards. Nadia wants to become an artist or a police woman and Rico, as a backup plan (that is if he changes his mind to become Prime Minister), may also join the police force to *'protect Roma people's rights.'* He has not yet decided.

Nadia was bullied at her former school but she does not want to talk about it. She played some “bullying” scenes in the Roma Support Group's Forum Theatre and takes free karate classes run by a Roma tutor. She wants to be accepted by her classmates and she will try very hard to make new friends. Rico is busy studying, drawing, taking photos, collecting pictures of animals, helping his mum and moving around in his inner-world. He is very popular in school thanks to his special “pen-friend” – everyone, teachers and pupils know him very well.

When a new Roma child is registered to his school and his/ her parents do not shy from telling teachers their ethnicity, they are told *'Oh, like Rico'* and they know that the teacher who said that was just trying to be friendly. What Rico has achieved in his school is what other people have struggled to achieve for centuries - it is OK to be Roma there.

Mother dreams about being alive for as long as possible to see her children growing and reaching their full potentials. She dreams about a place she can call her “HOME” with no racism, where her family can feel safe. But for now she dreams about going with her children for a holiday – they have never been on one.

Written by: Sylvia Ingmire

Date: 14/04/2014