Come to us in a peaceful way:

Improving experiences of Roma families with children's services in England

Research report
July, 2024

Acknowledgements

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Foreword

I grew up in a very traditional Roma family in the Czech Republic. I am from the Hungarian Lovari Roma group. My parents could not read and write. We spoke only Romanes at home and I could not speak Czech properly until I was 6 years old.

My greatest memory from my childhood, that I am fond of, is seeing my parents helping other Roma people that needed help. I recall that my mother or father sometimes brought home a person or even a whole family to our home to give them food or even let them stay overnight with us. Those people were in need or in difficult situations or they were just family members that came to see us, and they had a long journey to go back home and stayed overnight with us. In our Roma language we would say they brought home "bokale manushen" ("hungry people"). As a child I quite liked it because we were never alone, and I liked meeting new people. I was interested in their life stories. They were singing our Roma songs and taught me how to dance. I will never forget those people, their kindness and humility.

I was educated in a mainstream school. That was unusual because most of the Roma children were placed in schools for children with special needs. Those children had no special needs. They were in those schools simply because they were Roma and society believed that Roma children belonged in schools for children with special needs.

I was the only Roma child in the mainstream school. I was bullied every day, but it did not bother me because I knew when I came home, I would not be alone, and I had people around me who loved me. As soon as I came home all negativity at school was forgotten. Unity, humility, kindness, love and support are words that I learned as a child from my family and from other Roma people that I met in my childhood.

Roma families are united. Family means everything to us. My family helped me not to think about bullying in school and provided a great sanctuary that helped me deal with the level of mistreatment I experienced as a child.

Family also provides security for Roma. When you are in trouble, you always know that you can rely on your family to help you. Seeing my parents helping other people was an example to me of how Roma should behave towards each other and soon enough I understood that I wanted to help people. Helping others became natural to me and this led me to a career in law. I realised that knowing your rights is the best defence you can have because I believe that the opposite of poverty is not money, the opposite of poverty is justice.

I hope that this report leads to a greater understanding of Roma families in England and to equitable support for those in need.

Denisa Gannon, Roma lawyer

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Introduction

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> **Come to us in a peaceful way, don't just send letters, don't scare us, don't intimidate us, don't make us feel that you [social workers] have the power. Explain to us, in a nice way, what it is that you want from us. Don't bring fear and trauma into our lives.**
>
> **Roma parent**

This report presents the outcomes of multi-method research that was conducted in 2023, the culmination of a collaborative effort involving universities, civil society organisations, social care practitioners, and legal professionals.

The focus of our research, and this report, on Roma migrants as opposed to Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, is intentional. The term 'Gypsy Roma Travellers' (GRT) is valuable for fostering solidarity and highlighting the pervasive scale of marginalisation faced by the GRT communities. However, we acknowledge that it tends to obscure the differences between the groups and the specific circumstances and experiences of Roma migrants. By concentrating our efforts on this subgroup, we aim to bring attention to their unique challenges with children's services and contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the issues at hand.

The main aim of our research was to:

- examine available data regarding involvement of Roma families with children's services,
- identify the challenges and barriers and barriers that Roma families face when interacting with children's services, and
- make recommendations to address those challenges and barriers.

In particular, the research set out to answer the following questions:

- What factors contribute to Roma families' involvement with children's services?
- What obstacles do Roma families face when interacting with children's services?
- What factors enable Roma families to interact with children's services effectively?

We have tried to make this report accessible, so that it is read widely. We have included a glossary to explain what we mean by the terms we use in this report.

We anticipate that our study will spark a conversation about the crucial support needed for vulnerable migrants and inspire increased efforts in data collection and the development of vital resources for social workers, legal practitioners, and community advocates.

Terminology

Children's services

We used the term 'children's services' in this report because it is the name of a statutory service in England responsible for protecting children from abuse, neglect, and other forms of harm. This service also provides other kinds of support which we did not examine (such as early help, children in need).

Roma

Ancestors of the Roma migrated from India approximately 1000 years ago (Matras, 2014). They settled in Europe before migrating to the UK more recently. Roma people speak diverse languages as well as having differing cultural and historic backgrounds. Although descended from the same ancestry as British Romany Gypsies, they are a different group to Romany (Gypsies) and Travellers. In Europe, there are an estimated ten to twelve million Roma, most of whom are no longer nomadic (Understanding EU action on Roma inclusion, European Parliament, 2023).

Due to a history of violence and persecution as well as institutional racism and social exclusion, many Roma communities across Europe suffer socio-economic disparities, including low educational attainment, high unemployment rates, low life expectancy, poor health status and low political participation (EU Agency for Fundamental Rights). However, some have always been successful, even in the most adverse circumstances, and Roma have made important contributions since their arrival.

Historical timeline

- **700s - 1100s** Most of the ancestors of the Roma people came from various caste groups in India. They migrated out of India during times of expansion and upheaval, which included conflicts and other significant movements of people.

- **1100s - 1200s** Romani language emerges among an Indian group in Anatolia and the Balkans. This period may be seen as the beginning of Roma identity.

- **1300s -1400s** Roma began to arrive in Europe beyond the Ottoman Borders as they were being enslaved, especially in the Christian fringes of the Ottoman Empire in South- East Europe. Romani groups migrated to all countries in Europe, and other continents. Some settled, and lived in permanent camps or housing, while others survived the breakup of the original group in Anatolia by practising their commercial-nomadic trades by negotiating protection from other feudal rulers.

- **1530** The first laws expelling Roma from England and strong anti-vagrancy laws were introduced under Henry VIII.

- **1554** Under Queen Mary, the English Parliament passed the first Egyptians Act which made being a Gypsy a felony (i.e. punishable by death). These acts were not formally repealed until 1780. Genocidal laws also occurred in other West European countries from the 16th century until 1945.

- **1783** H.M.G. Grellmann's Die Zigeuner developed European scientific racism to provide a new kind of explanation for the culture and history of Roma.

- **1800s** The development of steam power opened up trade with the Americas, and lead to mass migration from poorer countries in Europe, which included the 'second wave' of migration of, perhaps, a million East European Roma.

- In **1899**, the Bavarian police established the "Central Office for Fighting the Gypsy Plague" in Munich. This office collected information on Roma people and coordinated efforts to monitor and control their movements.

- **1933 - 1945** Figures from the US Holocaust Memorial Research Institute put the number of Roma lives lost at between 500,000 and 1.5 million.

- From **1956** Attempts to settle the few remaining nomadic Roma by force in most Eastern European countries.

- **1971** The first modern World Romani Congress was held near London, during which an international Romani flag, motto (Opré Roma) and Anthem (Gelem, Gelem) were formally approved. It was attended by delegates who called themselves Roma, and other Romani Groups like Sinte and Romanichal Gypsies who did not, and by some Irish Travellers who rejected Romani identity but felt they suffered the same anti-Gypsy racism.

- **1989** Fall of communism and the migration of Roma from Eastern Europe towards the West greatly increased.

- **2004** Enlargement of the European Union (EU). The following countries (referred to as the 'A8' countries) joined the EU: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia and more Roma migrants arrived in the UK.

- **2005** The Decade of Roma Inclusion 2005–2015 began; an international initiative to improve the socio-economic status and social inclusion of Roma across central and Southeastern Europe.

- **2007** Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU (referred to as the 'A2' countries) and Roma migrants from these two countries arrived in the UK.

- **2008** Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month, taking place in June, established in the UK.

- **2011** The EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies up to 2020 is adopted, aiming to promote the social and economic integration of Roma in Europe.

- **2012** The European Commission initiated infringement procedures against several member states for failing to respect EU rules on free movement of Roma.

- **2015** The European Parliament adopted a resolution on anti-Gypsyism in Europe, recognising the discrimination Roma face and calling for comprehensive measures to combat it.

- **2020** The European Commission presented a new EU Roma strategic framework for equality, inclusion, and participation for 2020-2030, addressing critical areas such as education, employment, health, and housing.

- **2021** A report by the EU Agency for Fundamental Rights highlighted persistent socio-economic disparities faced by Roma communities across Europe, including low educational attainment, high unemployment rates, and poor health status.[1]

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1 For those interested to read more about Roma history, we recommend: Taylor, B., (2014) *Another Darkness, Another Dawn*, Reaktion Books or Matras, J., (2014) *I Met Lucky People: The Story of the Romani Gypsies*, Penguin.

Executive summary

Purpose

In recent years, concerns have emerged regarding the overrepresentation and treatment of Roma families within children's services in England. In response, Anglia Ruskin University, Lancaster University and Law for Life collaborated on an interdisciplinary and mixed-method study. This research, which directly involved Roma families, community groups working with Roma, legal professionals, and social workers, aimed to explore Roma families' experiences with children's services and identify systemic barriers and opportunities for improvement. Active participation of Roma families and community advocates was essential, and their voices and perspectives informed every stage of the research process, laying the groundwork for more effective and equitable service provision.

Key findings

- Evidence suggests an **increased involvement of Roma children with children's services**, highlighting the need for better data disaggregation to understand the scope of this issue.

- **Major contributing factors**: Discrimination, economic hardship, and cultural misunderstandings significantly affect Roma families' interactions with children's services.

- **Barriers to effective engagement**: These include deep-seated mistrust and fear of authorities, lack of cultural competence within children's services, communication challenges and low legal capability.

- **Enabling factors for effective interaction**: These include community-based social work, relational trust building, cultural competency and legal empowerment of Roma communities.

Recommendations for improvement

- **Enhanced data collection:** To better understand the proportionality of Roma family involvement with children's services, data collection needs to be more culturally sensitive and accurately disaggregated.

- **Inclusion strategies:** Developing a Roma Inclusion Strategy is crucial to address the pervasive issues of discrimination, poverty, and social exclusion faced by Roma communities.

- **Cultural competence within children's services:** Training for social work professionals on Roma culture and social contexts, including alertness to the impacts of intergenerational trauma, is essential to fostering more effective and empathetic service delivery.

- **Community engagement and education:** Strengthening collaboration with Roma communities through public legal education can empower Roma families and enhance their understanding and engagement with children's services.

Limitations

While constrained by a small sample size and limited duration, the research initiates a vital debate on the systemic barriers Roma families face when in contact with children's services. Despite these limitations, our findings are crucial for setting the stage for further research and sustained dialogue.

Conclusion

Our study underlines the pressing need for a more inclusive and culturally sensitive approach to the delivery of child protection services to Roma families in England. By addressing the unique challenges faced by this community and enhancing the cultural competence of children's services, we can improve outcomes for Roma children and families. This document not only highlights systemic issues but also serves as a call to action for policymakers, practitioners, and community leaders to work collaboratively towards a fairer and more effective child protection system, emphasising the urgency of the situation and the need for immediate action.

Reflective note

This interdisciplinary initiative aims to bridge significant knowledge gaps and provide a platform for voices often marginalised in policy discussions. By doing so, we can enrich the data and strengthen the potential for impactful policy change. Our approach prioritises inclusivity and collaboration, fostering trust and improving service delivery to better meet the needs of Roma families. We hope this project sets a precedent for future research and action.

What we did

In January 2023, Anglia Ruskin University, Lancaster University (Centre for Child and Family Justice Research) and Law for Life, commenced a collaborative mixed methods study which examined the experiences of Roma families with children's services in England. The field research was completed in September 2023. The study involved:

1/ A UK based literature review

We examined the experiences of Roma families with children's services in England over the last twenty years, by looking at the existing publications (academic articles, reports) published on this topic.

2/ A review of relevant policies

We reviewed policies implemented in the last fifteen years, including the independent review of children's social care (2022), the community cohesion framework, and the impact of austerity and Brexit on Roma families.

3/ An online survey and interviews with social care and legal professionals who have worked with Roma families in England

We disseminated an online survey to a range of social care and legal professionals to explore how Roma families interact with children's services. The survey consisted of a mixture of closed questions and open text boxes to provide more detailed information. The issues raised were then examined in greater depth through the use of online semi-structured interviews.

We conducted six semi-structured interviews with social workers, legal professionals, and community experts during May to June 2023. All interviews were undertaken online and varied between 50 to 80 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed.

The responses to the closed-ended survey questions were analysed descriptively and a thematic approach was used to analyse the open-ended questions. Similarly, a thematic approach was applied to the semi-structured interviews. Preliminary themes generated were then reviewed and refined to ensure the final themes provided an accurate representation of the data.

4/ Discussion groups with Roma community members

We conducted three discussion group meetings - in Rotherham, Sheffield and Liverpool. We chose these locations because we had existing links with an organisation (in Rotherham) and Roma activists (in Sheffield and Liverpool) who had supported Roma families with child protection issues. Roma community members acted as co-facilitators of the discussion group meetings. The main aim of the discussion groups was to explore the challenges that Roma families face when interacting with children's services and learn about positive experiences and models of good practice.

The discussion group questions were shared with the Roma co-facilitators in advance to review and refine. All discussion group meetings occurred face to face in June-July 2023 and lasted between 60 to 90 minutes. Discussion group meetings were audio-recorded and fully transcribed.

Transcripts[2] were analysed collaboratively with five Roma champions: four of whom were Roma, with experience of supporting Roma families with child protection issues, and one was non-Roma but had over twenty years of experience in supporting Roma families in this context. The data was collected and analysed in a sensitive and meaningful manner which was commented upon by the Roma champion:

'Firstly, I appreciated the structure of the discussion group sessions and how questions were laid out. It seems to align with the values of including people and seeing the families as individuals. When you look at the first question - How does the involvement with social workers make you feel? - that's very different from the discussion you would have if asking a question like- How do you find working with social workers? So right at the start you are putting the individuals and their feelings at the centre because often, in these spaces, feelings are denied, and we negate that that's a huge part of the process. When you're nervous, you think differently, you act differently. And so, the fact that you have made feelings the centre of your discussion is a very important aspect, from an academic point of view and generating content. Another aspect is that feelings are related to the body and the body is often removed when we have these kinds of conversations... Feelings are subjective, but the fact is that feelings are what often leads to miscommunication, breakdown in communication and the breakdown in actioning certain things. Someone feels that they communicated something, or someone feels that they have been understood so it's also about how to navigate these very subjective experiences. Social work is a profession that follows legal frameworks or local authorities' procedures but at the core of it there are two people or a team of people that are navigating and interpreting things that affect the entire family...

And I also witnessed how you worked with Roma discussion group facilitators and how you set up the discussion group. I wasn't involved in it, I was removed from it, but I know that you sent questions in advance.... And I am not surprised by the results you have had because people were allowed to be people or not have the language. Because we don't know how to talk about these things if we're scared or if this is about our children.'

Dr Rosa Kostic - Cisneros
Coventry University

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2 The transcripts were anonymised and any identifiable information was removed to enhance confidentiality and anonymity.

5/ Analysis of child safeguarding practice reviews in England involving Roma families

We systematically searched the National case review repository[3] using the search terms set out in the table below. The whole repository was searched in January 2023. At the time, it contained 1832 child safeguarding practice reviews.

In total, we found 3 cases involving Roma families on the NSPCC's National case review repository.[4]

Search terms	Selection	Results
'Roma' and 'roma'	'Case reviews only'	Four results, two of which were about Traveller families.
'Gypsy' and 'gypsy'	'Case reviews only'	One additional result about a Traveller family.
'Czech'	'Case reviews only'	One result, about a Roma family

3 When a child dies, or is seriously harmed, because of abuse or neglect, a child safeguarding practice review is conducted to identify ways that local professionals and organisations can better work together to safeguard children. The National case review repository is the most comprehensive collection of child safeguarding practice reviews in the UK. It provides a single place for published child safeguarding practice reviews to make it easier to access and share learning at a local, regional, and national level.

4 Child safeguarding practice reviews (CSPRs) were established under the Children Act (2004) to review cases where a child had died, and abuse or neglect is known or suspected. CSPRs could additionally be carried out where a child had not died but had come to serious harm because of abuse or neglect. They aimed to establish learning for agencies and professionals to improve the way that they work together to safeguard children. A local safeguarding children board (LSCB) could commission a review for any case where it suspects anything could be learned to improve local practice. In 2018, the Department for Education, changed the structure of the reviews, now known as Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews (SPRs). Responsibility for learning lessons now lies with a new national panel – the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel (the Panel) – and with local safeguarding partners. The Panel and local partners help to identify serious child safeguarding cases that may raise issues of national importance. They commission a review that involves all practitioners who may be relevant or have information that will help to provide learning for future practice. Case reviews can be found on the National case review repository which is hosted by the NSPCC.

6/ Analysis of the care proceedings cases that involve Roma families, available through the Lexis+ portal database

We searched the Lexis+ UK database[5] using the term 'Roma', with the advanced search functions used to select the jurisdiction of 'England and Wales', the practice area of 'Family Law' and the matter 'public law children' within the time frame 2013-2023. In total, 16 cases were identified.

The 16 cases were then uploaded into NVivo[6] for analysis. Analysis entailed assigning labels, called codes, to the relevant parts of the judgements which allowed for them to be organised and analysed by identifying common themes and trends. By using NVivo, we could better understand the most frequent legal challenges faced by Roma families within the UK child protection system.

We note that the cases on Lexis+ may not be representative of Roma child protection cases overall since cases on Lexis+ are recorded due to their legal significance or specific characteristics. This may, in turn, impact the results, for example cases with a cross-jurisdiction element to them may be more frequently reported than those without.

How we analysed the collective dataset

Each aspect of the research produced its own data which was analysed separately (see above) to begin with. The next phase of analysis involved looking across and within the different datasets to identify shared and distinct themes. These are represented in the structure of findings of this report.

To identify recommendations emerging from our key findings, we organised an expert group workshop, attended by five Roma and eight non-Roma professionals. Recommendations included in this report were largely identified in this workshop.

Limitations of the research

At the outset of this research, we identified a number of limitations, which could affect its results, including:

- time limitation,

- small sample of respondents, and

- data quality.

What follows is a short outline of what was done to mitigate these limitations.

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5 Lexis+ is an online database providing full-text access to case law, legislation and expert commentary.
6 NVivo is a computer software program that allows researchers to manage, analyse, and visualise qualitative data and documents systematically and individually.

Time limitation and small sample size

The funding obtained to undertake this research meant that data collection had to be completed within a period of six months. The data analysis took three months and report writing took approximately six months. This meant we had to be realistic about the number of participants that could be recruited into the study. As such, we adopted a targeted approach to ensure a diverse and, as much as possible, representative sample in terms of Roma community members, social care and legal professionals.

With a small sample size (number of respondents to a survey and professionals interviewed), it becomes challenging to generalise the findings to a larger population accurately. The results may not be representative of the broader group, leading to potential biases. Therefore, the survey was more of a springboard to illuminate the areas to focus on in the semi-structured interviews.

Data quality

In order to ensure that the research questions were accessible to Roma parents, we piloted them first and encouraged our Roma discussion group co-facilitators to invest time in explaining the meaning of some of the questions. Roma parents were also told that they did not need to answer questions if they did not wish to do so, if any made them feel uncomfortable.

We were aware that this topic is associated with a high degree of stigma in the Roma community and that participants may be reluctant to openly speak about their involvement with children's services. We therefore invited only parents who had direct experience with children's services in England and we invested time in creating a context that was marked by trust and mutual respect. For example, discussion groups with Roma parents were co-facilitated by Roma advocates, in Romanes language, who had established links with the local Roma communities, and they took place in community settings that Roma parents were familiar with. Our participants received a payment to take part in the interviews, but we made it clear that they did not need to answer any of our questions in order to receive their payment.

We believe that the data we collected through this research is a rich source of knowledge about Roma parents' experiences with children's services in England. In all our discussion groups it was evident that Roma parents appreciated the opportunity to voice their opinions, share their experiences and be heard. This, in itself, was an important experience for them and they put great effort into telling their stories accurately.

What we found

In this section of the report, we present the findings from each of our research activities.

1 Roma families and children's services in England: literature review

Introduction

Since 1989 the number of Roma migrating from Central and Eastern Europe into the UK has steadily increased (Poole, 2010). However, this literature review focuses on the experiences of Roma in contact with children's services from 2004 onwards, when greater numbers of Roma migrants entered the UK as new countries joined the EU - the 'A8' countries in 2004 and the 'A2' countries in 2007 (Lane et al., 2014; Allen et al., 2021).[7]

Roma migrants are a distinct group to Gypsies and Travellers despite the fact that they are frequently conflated in research literature and in policy and practice terms (Greenfields, 2017). 'Roma' is also used (not uncontroversially) as an umbrella term within the EU to denote a range of communities including Roma, Travellers and Gypsies (Lane et al.; 2014). Roma migrants in the UK experience particular barriers and inclusion needs, which are informed by their histories, and experiences in Eastern Europe. Nonetheless, it is important to emphasise that Roma in the UK are a heterogeneous group comprising individuals who come from different European countries and therefore speak diverse languages as well as having different cultural and historic backgrounds (Lane et al., 2014). It has been estimated that there are approximately 200,000 Roma in the UK (Brown et al., 2013), with the latest Census data indicating just over 103,000 Roma living in England and Wales (Census, 2021).[8]

There has long been concern that Roma children throughout Europe are removed from their families at higher rates than children from other ethnic groups (European Roma Rights Centre, 2011; Allen, 2018). Indeed, there is a widespread perception at grassroots level that the experiences of Roma families with children's services in England are largely negative and that families are subject to a disproportionate amount of intervention and reporting (Allen, 2015; Byrne, 2021), although data to substantiate these claims has remained inconclusive. However, Allen and Hamnett's (2022) analysis of the Department of Education data, obtained through freedom of information requests, found that despite the limitations of the data sets due to aggregation (see below), Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups are overrepresented in child welfare services in England.

Therefore, this review is divided into three sections:

- The first section discusses the problems with validity and reliability of available data on Roma migrants and the widespread conflation of existing data on children's services contacts with evidence pertaining to Gypsy populations.

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[7] The largest enlargement of the European Union (EU), in terms of number of states and population, took place on 1 May 2004.The following countries (referred to as the 'A8' countries) joined the EU: Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. In January 2007 Bulgaria and Romania, joined the EU (referred to as the 'A2' countries).

[8] The disparity in numbers may be explained by a reluctance to self-identify as Roma in Census responses.

- The second section analyses the literature available on Roma migrants in England in terms of their contacts and experiences with children's services.

- The third section explores the context behind an apparent lack of engagement and fear of child protection processes amongst Roma families.

Section One

Data: Difficulties of accuracy and aggregation

There is a significant challenge in attempting to draw out accurate data on migrant Roma families in England due to the aggregation of data on Roma with Gypsy (and sometimes Traveller) groups. Much of the research carried out to date conflates these groups into a generic Gypsy, Roma and Traveller category. Lane et al. (2014) highlight that whilst these communities share certain commonalities of experience in terms of racism, discrimination, social injustice and poverty, the category fails to acknowledge any differences between these distinct communities.

Whilst some argue that the conflated categories of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller can assist in the avoidance of discrimination (Brunnberg and Visser-Schuurman, 2015), other authors contend that these categories are a distinct barrier to understanding the extent to which Roma are involved with children's services (Allen and Riding, 2018; Allen and Hamnett, 2022). Additionally, Roma communities (and indeed Gypsy and Traveller communities) themselves are often reluctant to self-ascribe, due to fears around being victimised (Welsh Government, 2023). This further adds to the tension in examining potential disproportionality of Roma families' involvement with children's services.

Although recommendations have repeatedly and over a long period of time been made to disaggregate the data between GRT groups by ethnicity (Greenfields et al., 2015; Allen, 2022), this has not been actioned to date in England in government data, nor in much of the literature. In failing to disaggregate the data by ethnicity, we are only offered a general picture rather than the nuance and insight needed to accurately understand the experiences of the Roma families in England.

Government census data in England in 2021 included Roma along with the Gypsy and Traveller category 'tick box' and a recent UK Department of Education report (Ahmed et al, 2022) continues to use conflated categories of Gypsy/Roma together and Traveller separately. Even utilising the category of EU Roma migrant itself, as has been highlighted, risks homogenising the distinct experiences of different groups of migrant Roma (Dagilytė and Greenfields, 2018).

There is therefore a serious caveat to some of the research used in this review to evidence the experiences of Roma families with children's services in England. Where the research conflates Roma with Gypsy and Traveller groups, data on Roma is potentially problematic, possibly skewed towards other ethnic groups, and therefore inaccurate. However, in the absence of much research that documents Roma experiences alone, it has been necessary to use this research which treats Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people as a singular collective group. Where this occurs, it is clearly stated in this review. This problematic approach to aggregation highlights the critical need for future research which focuses directly on Roma themselves as their histories, culture and socio-economic situation in the UK is unique and clearly distinct from the other communities with whom they are often grouped.

Section Two

Roma families and their experiences with children's services in England

2.1. Numbers of Roma children involved with children's services

Data on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller family involvement with children's services has been gathered in the UK by the Department of Education since 2009 (Greenfields et al., 2015; Allen and Riding, 2018; Allen and Hamnett, 2022). Taken in isolation, data on the conflated category of Gypsy/Roma children who are 'looked after' shows that there has been a significant increase between 2009 and 2015, from 30 children in the looked after children system in 2009 up to 250 in 2015 (Allen, 2018a) and 600 in 2023 (Gov.UK). This does not necessarily mean that all of these children have been permanently removed from their family home. Some may be in short-term accommodation or staying with a family member/ friend under the auspices of being 'looked after'.[9]

Allen and Hamnett's (2022) analysis of Department of Education data, obtained through freedom of information requests, concludes that:

- 8,240 'Gypsy/Roma' children were referred to children's services between 2011–2012 and 2017–2018.

- 3,834,110 referrals were made to children's services for 'All other' ethnic groups during the same time frames.

However, a recent Department of Education report (2022) explains that initial referrals are not necessarily converted into child protection plans. It states that there are lower odds of proceeding from referral to child protection plan and ultimately becoming looked after for members of the Gypsy, Roma and Irish Traveller populations when compared to a number of other ethnic groups (Ahmed et al., 2022).

Whilst some research concludes that Gypsy/Roma families are overrepresented with regard to involvement with children's services (Allen and Hamnett, 2022; Ahmed et al., 2022), other research suggests that the increase in contact with children's services of children from a Gypsy/Roma background coincides with increased migration of Roma to England since the enlargement of the EU (Traveller Movement, 2017). Moreover, the Traveller Movement analysis of available statistics suggests '[T]here is no evidence of 'disproportionality' at the national level' when numbers of children becoming looked after are reviewed (p. 4). A year-on-year increase in numbers of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children becoming looked after has occurred, though this is significantly less in the case of Traveller children than Gypsy/Roma children, and likely linked to Roma and Traveller families living in situations of persistent poverty' (Traveller Movement, 2017).

Ultimately, whilst there remain differences of opinion in the conclusions to be drawn from the available data, there is a clear need for disaggregation of data between Gypsy and Roma populations in further efforts to reliably explore whether children from these backgrounds are overrepresented in child welfare services in England.

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9 There has also been an increase in the number of looked after children across the board.

2.2. Factors behind children's services' interventions

In Ahmed's 2022 publication, which looked at ethnic disparities in families in contact with social care, neglect was most commonly identified as a factor in referral and assessments for Gypsy/ Roma children (conflated data). In contrast, concerns over domestic abuse followed by parental mental health issues were the most commonly identified factors in most other ethnic groups. When first assessed, Gypsy/Roma children were found to have both the highest proportions of risk factors for extra-familial harms (16%) and child sexual exploitation (3% compared to 1% for all other children) although it should be noted that this calculation is based on population size aligned to the 2011 Census (Ahmed et al., 2022, p. 19). The report also states that, compared to all other ethnic groups, Irish Traveller and Gypsy/Roma children and families experience fewer contacts with children's services to support the needs of a child living with a disability.

Greenfield's et al. (2015) qualitative research found that children's services interventions have frequently been triggered by what appears to be 'medical neglect' as health and social care professionals in the UK are unaware or do not take account of the fact that Roma families may not have been able to access, or afford, medical care before their arrival in the UK (p. 46). Indeed, many may think that they also have to pay for health care in the UK. Furthermore, community organisations working with Roma also suggest that many Roma lack understanding how to access health services in the UK or may be prevented from accessing it due to limited literacy, language barriers, and often have difficulties in registering with GP surgeries due to lack of documentation (Van Cleemput et al., 2010, Tobi et al., 2010). In addition, many Roma people have limited health awareness, leading to many conditions either not being recognised or being misunderstood (Tobi et al., 2010).

Greenfield's et al. (2015) research also acknowledges the effect of poor-quality accommodation on Roma families' physical and mental health. The impact of housing issues, such as disrepair, overcrowding or insecure housing, is relevant not only at individual and public health levels but can also have implications for social care interventions in relation to children and families. Although there is a lack of research and limited data on these issues, anecdotal evidence from community organisations working with Roma families shows that parents' low income, lack of legal knowledge and support available often prevent them from successfully challenging unscrupulous landlords or accessing good quality accommodation, including social housing (Parker and Bica, 2024).

Linguistic barriers, inadequate interpreting, limited literacy and lack of familiarity with UK social work concepts can lead to refusals to engage with support services, such as parenting classes. Once adequately explained and understood by Roma families, such services are usually accepted and perceived as helpful. This, and other examples, point to the importance of appropriate language use and cultural understanding, and the dangers of labelling parents' attitudes as non-compliant and therefore a potential cause of intervention (Greenfields et al., 2015, Allan and Adams, 2013). Thus, understanding of pre-migration conditions and clear communication are key to more successful interactions.
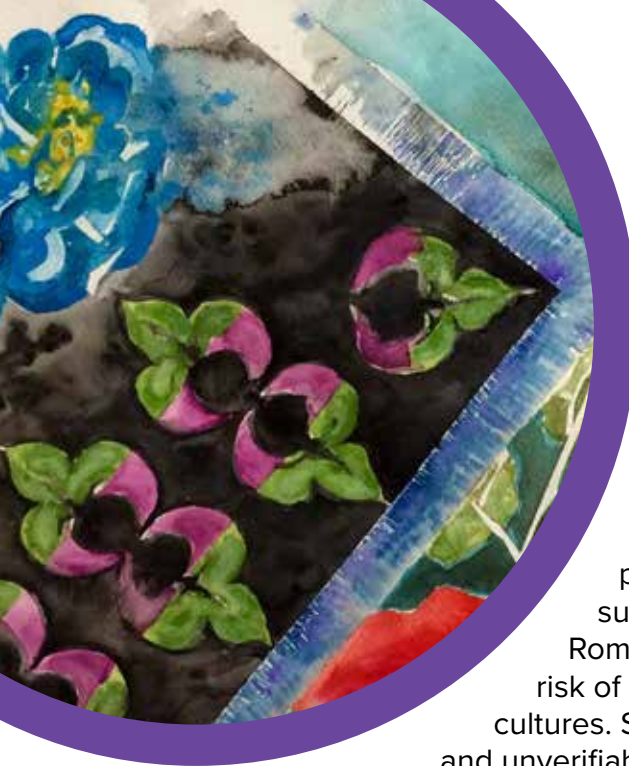
2.3. Social work practice and attitudes towards Roma migrants

The literature identifies several reasons that contribute to the problematic nature of interactions between Roma families and children's services. These contributing factors, in turn, can facilitate an environment receptive to the removal of children into alternative care. More recently it has been noted that children's services often operate under considerable pressure and this, coupled with lack of appropriate support and training, can lead to assumptions that Roma, Gypsy and Traveller parents put children at risk of more harm than may be true of members of other cultures. Such assumptions can form the basis for 'unreliable and unverifiable assessments and examples of oppressive and coercive practice' (Allen and Riding, 2018).

Expectations of parenting and social work understandings of 'good enough' parenting are overwhelmingly based on Western norms whereby trusted adults are always present with children or young people. There may accordingly be some variance in cultural expectations or understanding over when and how in-person parental monitoring and care is required, and indeed such Western models may not fully align with the need, within some Roma communities, for parents to work shifts or at times leave children with community members who are not part of their household or where there is a perhaps distant familial connection (Powell, 2016).

These familial care practices, together with presumptions of medical neglect (which may pertain to pre-migration untreated health conditions or lack of familiarity with NHS care system), poverty or lack of understanding of both legal child protection framework and UK parenting norms, may be perceived by social workers as non-compliance with 'good enough' parenting, or interpreted as parental neglect. Indeed, such issues appear to feature in many child protection or children in need interventions (Greenfields et al., 2015).

Communication is the key barrier to engagement and the source of most misunderstandings between Roma families and social workers. Social workers often misinterpret a lack of understanding by families as tacit agreement. When families do not do what social workers think they have agreed to, they may be seen as non-compliant (Greenfields et al., 2015). The overall effect is to produce interventions which can be overly controlling and lack the necessary support for these families (Allen and Riding, 2018).

2.4. Prejudice and racism

Racism amongst professionals, including social workers, towards the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities is a complex phenomenon which informs and unconsciously legitimises the treatment of these families (Cemlyn, 2008; Asimopoulos et al, 2019). It has been shown that professionals can hold a set of beliefs of what is considered to be 'common sense knowledge' about Roma families which emanates from negative media portrayals of Roma families (Greenfields and Dagilytė, 2018).

Allen and Hulmes (2021) examine the concept of 'aversive racism'[10] and how it often contributes towards negative scrutiny of minoritised communities, including Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups. This work builds upon that advanced by Allen and Riding (2018) which posited that institutional racism exists within the practice of child protection, without theorising the reasons why. The 2021 article seeks to address the theoretical shortcomings of the 2018 report and argues that the conceptual framework of aversive racism is useful to understand the apparent contradiction here. The contention is that in child protection practice, tension exists 'between the conscious, explicit, and sincere support for anti-oppressive practice, and the underlying unconscious negative feelings and beliefs towards the conceptual 'Gypsy' culture' (p. 6). Multiple manifestations of such unconscious prejudice are apparent in examples given in that paper, revealing how statistics and data are used to underpin assumptions of 'Gypsy' issues, which are assumed to affect all Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families.

Indeed, Allen and Hulmes contend that they have exposed a critical flaw within child protection practice here, 'that aversive racism could enable the justification of punitive action, including the removal of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children into state care, even in the absence of verified harm' (Allen and Hulmes, 2021, p. 9). Evidence gathered within the literature shows the importance of constantly requiring an anti-racist stance from professionals as they often do not acknowledge that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities are ethnic minorities protected under the Equality Act 2010 (Allen et al., 2021).

2.5. Roma experiences with the care system

It is arguable that care placements for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children away from home are often by definition 'unsuitable', due to the fact that such placements are typically arranged outside of their communities (Allen 2014). The lack of foster carers from GRT communities means that cultural continuity for children in alternative care is a significant issue and not well facilitated (Allen, 2018a; Allen, 2015; Cemlyn, 2009).

There has been little sustained positive work with communities to support the maintenance of cultural identity and development of appropriate resources by care agencies. However, some progress has been made on this front in terms of national guidance provided by a UK fostering agency (Allen, and Adams, 2013), NGO support to facilitate communication and engagement and the community social work model of engagement with families (Allen, 2015; Greenfields et al., 2015).

Research on the lived experiences of Romani and Traveller children into adulthood shows rejection and antipathy from their communities after being in care partly due to 'culturally incompetent practices' and 'insensitive care planning decisions' (Allen, 2018a, p. 172). It has also been noted that the abuse, trauma and discrimination that children removed from the family home experience can, in some cases, be even worse than the situations they are ostensibly being protected from (Greenfields et al., 2015). Furthermore, in a recent review of the datasets on youth justice for children in care, those within the category of Gypsy/Roma were found to have the highest rates of caution and conviction, further evidencing a downward cycle of exclusion experienced by young people from these communities who have come into contact with children's services. (Hunter et al., 2023).

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10 The American Psychological Association defines 'aversive racism' as a form of racial prejudice felt by individuals who outwardly endorse egalitarian or non-racist attitudes and values but nonetheless experience negative emotions in the presence of members of certain racial groups.

Section Three

Contributing and background factors to Roma experiences with children's services, and professional positions towards Roma

3.1. The media and prevailing stereotypes

Portrayals of Roma in the UK are prone to a range of generic and negative stereotypes. As a group 'for whom stigmatisation and a perceived inferiority from the outside are almost perennial and universal aspects of their asymmetrical established-outsider relations' (Powell, 2016, p.135), they are subject to a long-term dehumanising narrative that can influence approaches and interventions by professionals. Negative stereotypes have been promulgated by the tabloid press using sensationalist language which play into existing prejudice (Lane et al., 2014). Media coverage of Roma migration has focused on topics of anti-social behaviour, child exploitation and abductions and further contributed to parental fears of overt intervention from authorities (Dagilytė and Greenfields, 2015). Sensationalist coverage of high-profile police investigations such as Operations Golf and Norman into child trafficking rings in Romania with links to the UK, has served to heighten scrutiny of Roma and harden public beliefs around the association of Roma with child-trafficking (Norton and Foster, 2012).

3.2. Access to employment and welfare support

The shifting legal rules around access to the employment market, and welfare support for migrants in the UK mean that professionals are not always aware how to apply these to Roma families. This 'multifactorial social exclusion places Roma migrants in a situation of unique disadvantage' and results in ever greater scrutiny of their movements (Greenfields and Dagilytė, 2018, p. 84).

The impacts of official confusion around their rights create a 'potential mix for a toxic and declining situation' which, when coupled with diminishing trust in state agencies and fears of child protection interventions, can contribute to 'quasi-voluntary' returns (Greenfields and Dagilytė, 2018, p.93). In addition, front line workers are often ill equipped to adequately assess the situations of the families they encounter, or the complexities of their migration trajectories, and how these often result in present, frequently marginalised circumstances, and extreme poverty. Consequently, this climate exacerbates fear for families in already unstable housing and employment circumstances, who are then unable to access the support needed to provide what children's services consider to be stable homes for their children.

3.3. Importance of context and cultural norms

Research has documented the multiple 'assimilatory pressures imposed upon Roma(ni) and Traveller people through history' (Greenfields and Smith, 2018) and it is these pressures and expectations that lie at the heart of the tension between Roma and social workers. The perceived mismatch of cultural norms in Britain and those of Roma families result in the latter operating by a set of standards which do not conform to those which social workers in England might expect. Powell (2016) draws upon Elias' (2000) framework to demonstrate 'a sharp contrast in childhood processes' between Western concepts of child rearing and familial interactions and those of Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities' (p. 147). As that research shows, Gypsy, Traveller and Roma childhoods are

oriented towards the family much more so than in wider society – where the 'we' has clear preponderance over the 'I' (Elias, 2011, p. 216), a situation driven by a combination of the ability of the group to protect themselves from external hostility, the importance of passing down of culture and oral history, and the role of children in continuing these traditions (Powell, 2016).

These fundamental differences in culture and community dynamic, coupled with the aforementioned aversive racism towards Roma, Gypsies and Travellers, breeds an environment whereby suspicion and the opportunity to misjudge or rush to unfavourable conclusions is high on both sides of the equation. In a spiral, frequently unduly 'coercive interventions' continue and '[M]istrust pervades the relationships between the communities and child protection agencies, undermining productive engagement' (Greenfields et al., 2015, p.13).

3.4. Fear, mistrust, and lack of engagement by Roma families with external agencies

Facing serious discrimination is part and parcel of the adverse, unpleasant encounters with state apparatus and agencies which are well documented as part of Roma people's experience throughout Europe (Picker, 2010; Nacu, 2012; Greenfields et al., 2015) and should be recognised as the lived history which they bring to their lives in England.

The terrible trajectory of their history in Europe includes decades of hostility and attempts at cultural annihilation involving the forced sterilisation of women, removal of children to non-Roma families and placing of children in special schools (Poole and Adamson, 2008). This historical context is the basis for the legacy of state interest in Roma lifestyles and families and accordingly, for many Roma both in the UK and internationally, an often well grounded fear of authority.

Consequently, a strong mistrust of external agencies due to discrimination and prejudice suffered over many years in their countries of origin has contributed to the reluctance to participate and engage with child protection investigations, a state of affairs which can exacerbate misunderstanding and poor communication (Allen, 2015).

Fear is prevalent and impacts on Roma people's willingness to engage with public services, with the greatest fear around children being taken into care.

The importance of community privacy and, for some, a preference for separation from settled non-Roma communities may also contribute to reluctance in becoming involved with outside agencies, particularly as this type of attention may be perceived as bringing shame upon families (Allen and Adams, 2013).

This sense of anxiety is exacerbated by the lack of understanding of the workings of UK service provision among Roma families (Marvel and Felja, 2020), and by the inability to access the very support that could enable them to provide what professionals would deem appropriate care for their children (Humphris, 2017; Law for Life, 2021).

Literature review conclusion

This literature review has assessed the research available on Roma migrants and their engagement with children's services in the UK. It has confirmed that the data is problematic on several fronts, significantly in terms of how, as a result of the design of administrative statistics, there is an aggregation of findings on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities in most of the available research, thereby treating them as one (occasionally two) core groupings and potentially ascribing outcomes to the different ethnic groups that may be problematic or misleading. Moreover, the reluctance of many Gypsy, Roma and Traveller families to self-ascribe exacerbates the difficulties in clearly understanding the complexities and realities of Roma families' experiences with children's services.

Reflection on the literature has also demonstrated that Roma families face a unique set of obstacles to their fair and impartial treatment by children's services, resulting from long-standing stereotypes and racism perpetuated by media representations and notions of 'common sense' attitudes towards their way of life and culture. Communication problems, many Roma people's fear of authority due to long-term maltreatment and their complicated histories of subjugation and discrimination in countries of origin, intertwine to forge a perfect storm of misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and suspicion on all sides. Ultimately, this leads to a widespread failure to ensure a neutral and objective environment in which to assess and support their needs.

In conclusion, there is a need for further research into Roma people's experiences and the development of collaborative programmes between Roma civil society and children's services, to support the development of more culturally competent practices which upskill professionals and enhance mutual understanding.

2 Review of relevant policies and their impact on Roma family life in England

The literature review revealed that the Roma migrants residing in the UK face a unique set of challenges. A decade of persistent austerity measures has dismantled vital public services and safety nets specifically designed for low-income families and vulnerable populations. Additionally, the aftermath of Brexit has ushered in political and legislative changes that not only prevent 'unwanted' migrants from entering the country but also severely restrict the rights of those who already reside in the UK. In light of these developments, it is vital to closely examine the impact of policies and legal developments on the rights and well-being of Roma families.

This section will first look at the repercussions of austerity measures in recent years, shedding light on how they have led to increased levels of poverty and inequality. It will illustrate how the cuts to essential public services have disproportionately affected already severely disadvantaged groups, pushing many families into destitution and increasing the number of children taken into care. Subsequently, we look at the changes brought about by Brexit, specifically focusing on the impact of hostile environment measures on migrants and minority groups. By navigating through these contextual factors, we aim to provide a deeper understanding of the structural challenges faced by Roma migrants and other vulnerable groups.

2.1. Austerity

Austerity measures were introduced in the UK in 2010 as a response to the economic downturn following the 2008 financial crisis. This was done to address the budget deficit and national debt by cutting government spending and reducing borrowing. In 2010, the Conservative-Liberal Democrat government unleashed a succession of spending cuts and reforms through the Welfare Reform Act 2012. These measures amounted to an estimated £19 billion annually and constituted the most substantial state spending cuts since World War II (Beatty and Fothergill, 2013). The reforms led to the loss of 900,000 public sector jobs from 2011 to 2018, alongside reductions in welfare payments, housing subsidies, and social services, amounting to over £30 billion between 2010 and 2019 (Poinasamy, 2013). The austerity package included the freezing of child benefit, the reduction of local housing allowance, the implementation of the 'bedroom tax' and benefit cap. In addition, local authority spending on youth services in England plummeted by £1.1 billion, with a staggering 74% reduction in real-terms expenditure (YMCA, 2022). In 2020/21, seven local authorities reported zero expenditure on youth services, while several others allocated less than £15 per 5-17-year-old, slashing spending by over 90% since 2010-2011.

2.1.1. Increase in poverty

The combination of drastically reduced welfare benefits, growing unemployment and cuts in salaries has resulted in reduced incomes and growing poverty among many families in England. Research shows that children and young people were significantly affected, with a sharp increase in child poverty, not only in the UK but also across advanced economies. UNICEF's (2014) report unveiled a stark reality: from 2008 to 2012, the median income in UK households with children decreased by 15%, effectively erasing six years' worth of income progress for these families. During this time, the number of children living in severe material deprivation also significantly increased. The report highlighted that nearly half (44%) of the severely deprived children across thirty European countries in 2012 lived in just three countries: Italy (16%), Romania (14%), and the UK (14%). More recently, an estimated 4.3 million children are living in poverty in the UK (IGPP, 2023). The Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG, 2023) reported that in 2022, around 340,000 more children were pushed into poverty, while families already struggling to make ends meet were facing even greater levels of deprivation due to the cost-of-living crisis. This means 4.2 million children (29% of all UK children) were in poverty - up from 3.6 million in 2010-11. Despite the difficulty in obtaining precise data on household income and poverty rates for Roma children with migrant background in the UK, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2022) has highlighted Roma children as an exceptionally vulnerable minority across Europe, with a staggering 90% being at risk of poverty. Research published by the London School of Economics (Burchardt et al., 2018, pg. 34) showed stark disparities faced by Roma children in England and Wales, highlighting that nearly 25% of Roma children under 19 living in the UK face deprivation in housing, education, and health, compared to only 2% of other children. The indicators from the 2021 Census also suggest significant poverty within this community. Employment rates among the Roma are markedly lower than the general population, and many live in overcrowded housing conditions (26.5% compared to 8.4%). Additionally, educational attainment is considerably lower, with a significant proportion lacking formal qualifications, which limits job prospects and earning potential. These factors collectively point to a higher likelihood of living in poverty.

2.1.2. Racial and ethnic inequalities

Research further suggests that austerity measures, particularly cuts to social services, educational programmes and community support further entrenched racial and ethnic inequalities, disproportionately affecting the poorest minority households and migrants, like Roma. For example, according to data compiled by The Woman's Budget group (2017), between 2010 and 2020, Black and Asian households in the lowest income bracket faced a substantial decline in living standards, experiencing an average drop of 19.2% and 20.1%, respectively. This translated to annual average real-term losses of £8,407 and £11,678.

In 2018, a UN Special Rapporteur (The Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2018) asserted that austerity measures disproportionately harmed racial and ethnic minority communities, inadvertently serving as 'a prime instrument of racial subordination'. The report referenced research from the Equality and Human Rights Commission, projecting a 5% income loss by 2022 for Black households due to austerity, double the loss compared to white households.

Additionally, funding cuts resulting from austerity significantly weakened the capacity of small organisations in the third sector, impairing their ability to act as champions for racial equality and fight discrimination. The latest census shows severe disparities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, which were likely accelerated by austerity measures. For instance:

- 27% of Roma experience overcrowded living conditions, far surpassing the 8% average in England and Wales.

- Employment rates are notably lower among those identifying as Roma, with only 54% employed compared to the 60% average.

- Furthermore, 29% have elementary occupations, while 31% have no qualifications, and less than 4% have completed higher education.

Recent research (Sibieta, 2021) further suggests that the reduction in education spending and the elimination of specialised programmes (Edwards, 2017) disproportionately affected Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children, further exacerbating the persistent gap in education performance (Ford, 2022).

2.1.3. A rise in children entering care

Our literature review showed that a growing number of Roma children enter care, and the majority of the referrals are based on reported neglect. This reflects a broader trend whereby the evisceration of preventive family support services, such as Sure Start, and rising poverty levels have generated an increase in the number of children from low-income families being taken into care. The Association of Directors of Children's Services said austerity policies and an increasingly fragmented approach to public services were taking a toll on communities and punishing the most economically fragile households (Butler, 2017). The official statistics (Department for Education, 2023) reveal that conditions have progressively worsened. At the end of March 2023, the number of children looked after by local authorities in England rose to 83,840 - up 2% - continuing the rise seen in recent years. This is a rate of 71 children looked after per 10,000 children - up from 70 in 2022. The number of children classed as 'children in need' because they have been assessed as needing support by children's services stands steady at 403, 090. The number of children on protection plans is 50,780, a 0.3% drop since 2022. However, recent studies show that children in deprived areas are overrepresented in care proceedings. A 2023 study by Lancaster University (Doebler et al., 2023) found that for every one unit increase in the standardised Office for National Statistics' (ONS) English index of multiple deprivation, the number of children in care proceedings in English family courts increased by around 70%. According to a 2024 report by Health Equity North, nine in every thousand children are in care in the deprived areas of the north, compared with six in the rest of England. For example, the report shows that one in every 52 children in Blackpool are in care compared with one in 140 across England.

Josh MacAlister, leading the children's care review (2022), emphasised that councils are 'trapped in a cycle of crisis intervention' with no resources for strategic planning or reform. Indeed, research confirms that deprived communities have worse access to good-quality children's services, and that government policies that have increased poverty and retrenched preventative services have further exacerbated this inequality (Webb et al., 2022). Moreover, a dramatic reduction of funding to the voluntary sector, has greatly diminished community resources. A substantial proportion of the free or low-cost facilities and services provided by non-for-profit organisations have been scaled back or closed (Smith, 2023; Arrieta Hernandez, 2021; Harries et al., 2019). Likewise, community development services and workers have been cut, resulting in much more limited support to marginalised communities (Popple, 2015; Fright and Davies, 2023). This has negative consequences for social work engagement with minority ethnic groups, a development reflected in our literature review.

The 2022 Independent Review of Children's Social Care report (MacAlister, 2022) looked at the needs, experiences and outcomes of the children supported by social care. It identified serious shortcomings in the current social care system and called for immediate and wide-ranging reforms. It evaluated current children's services as rigid, crisis-focused and disconnected from families' needs and children's holistic interests, particularly in understanding their need for emotional connections. It identified the inequalities and stigma that care leavers face as one of the most pressing civil rights issues of our time. It also criticised the government for its lack of clear guidance and support for social care.

The report emphasises the need for investment in community-based services, which can help families in crisis and reduce the demand for emergency interventions. According to the report this demand has led to an increase in the number of children being placed on child protection registers or entering care in the last ten years. To tackle this crisis the report proposed an ambitious five-year investment programme of £2.6 billion. It projected that without substantial reforms by 2032, close to 100,000 children could be in care, marking an increase from the current 80,000 and resulting in a 50% surge in costs, reaching £15 billion.

Despite its ambitious objectives, the review has faced criticism for overlooking the pivotal role of poverty and destitution in the escalating rates of children entering care (BASWA, 2021). The absence of any mention of the Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and the lack of attention given to addressing structural racism are also notable points of concern. It is a missed opportunity to propose holistic interventions sensitive to cultural differences and instances of systemic discrimination.

In response to this report, on 2 February 2023, the government published a new vision to transform children's social care: 'Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy'. The government's social care strategy sets out six key 'pillars' of the reform process:

1. Trial a new 'family help' service to provide specialist support to families before their problems get too big.

2. Reform child protection so investigations are led by expert social workers.

3. Trial a new approach to allow extended families to look after at-risk children, as an alternative to fostering or residential care.

4. Reform the way that local authorities commission homes for children in care, and improve the support available for care-experienced people.

5. Recruit new social workers and improve career development.

6. Introduce a new national framework for social care to guide the system, inform inspection and improve data collection.

The government allocated an additional £8.5 million to fostering initiatives, elevating the total funding for the 2023-2025 period to £36 million. This allocation represents a significant commitment to fostering services. However, it falls short of meeting the broader financial needs identified

by the Independent Care Review, which recommended a substantial £2.6 billion investment in children's social care. In contrast, the government's commitment through the 'Stable Homes Built on Love' initiative extends only to £200 million up to 2025. Given the historical underfunding in children's social care and early intervention programmes, this discrepancy highlights the ongoing need for considerably greater investment to ensure that care-experienced children and young people receive adequate support to thrive.

Moreover, just like the independent review, the strategy overlooks the role that poverty plays in the challenges faced by children and families, failing to integrate measures that address socioeconomic disparities. Additionally, it does not sufficiently tackle issues related to race and ethnicity, which are critical factors in ensuring equitable support and outcomes in children's social care.

2.2. Brexit

As the United Kingdom underwent a transformative period with the decision to leave the European Union, commonly known as Brexit, significant changes were introduced, including the implementation of a new immigration regime. Our literature review indicates that post-Brexit realities have had a negative impact on Roma migrants' ability to create a safe environment for their families. The intersection of intensified immigration enforcement measures and the broader sociopolitical climate has exacerbated challenges, leading to heightened racial tensions and contributing to a pervasive sense of confusion about immigration status. In this context, EU migrant families, including Roma, find themselves navigating a complex web of uncertainties, including access to essential services, housing, employment opportunities, and social welfare provisions. Additionally, fluctuations in the economy post-referendum might have further strained their already limited financial resources, deepening their levels of poverty and hardship.

2.2.1. New immigration regime

In January 2021, free movement ended, and EU citizens who arrived in the UK before 31 December 2020 kept their rights in the UK and needed to make an application to the Home Office under the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS). Those coming to live or work in the UK after this date were required to apply for a visa. Post-Brexit mechanisms removed multiple protections for workers (Home Office, 2021) and EU citizens (Right to Remain, 2024), leaving many with visas that make them dependent on their employers and vulnerable to exploitation. The introduction of varying immigration status - pre-settled status and settled status - has resulted in differential access to rights and entitlements, creating uncertainty even among individuals sharing a broad migration status. Legal challenges are ongoing, and the Home Office is still regularly announcing changes to the EU Settlement Scheme rules as a result of litigation. New rules about residency, employment duration, or the period of stay directly affect eligibility concerning public services and welfare benefits. For example, EEA nationals are at risk of being found to be ineligible for benefits when they have pre-settled status (NRPF Network, 2020). Further challenges (Bowen, 2024) with the EUSS include:

- the high number of late applications, demonstrating that concerns about eligible people missing the application deadline were well-founded (Barnard, 2022),

- delays processing applications (Sumption and Cuibus, 2023), and

- those with pending EUSS applications who are issued a Certificate of Application experiencing problems with employers and landlords, despite having permission to work with a Certificate of Application pending an EUSS decision (Vicol and McClelland, 2021).

Most new arrivals in the UK post-December 2020 are deemed to be 'subject to immigration control' under section 115 of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999. Accordingly, they need to apply for a visa and are excluded from claiming any benefits that are classed as 'public funds', including assistance under Parts VI and VII of the Housing Act 1996, unless they are granted a visa which gives them recourse to public funds. Research shows that such exclusionary policies exacerbate social deprivation and isolation experienced by vulnerable families making it more difficult for professionals to respond in ways which safeguard children's welfare (Jolly and Gupta, 2022).

Confusion around eligibility makes it exceptionally difficult for social workers to assess the entitlements of individual family members. Experts in child protection insist that the impact of differential rights and cuts to material and financial support accounts for a disproportionate number of migrants represented in child safeguarding practice reviews (Laird and Tedam, 2019). Our literature review supports these claims by showing that when working with Roma families, social workers have a limited understanding of their legal status and their eligibility for public funds. The confusion, combined with a lack of cultural competency, negatively affects the provision of adequate support and might lead to an erroneous assessment of families' circumstances and children's well-being.

Roma and EU settled status (EUSS)

The Roma community finds themselves encountering considerable difficulties in obtaining EU settled status post-Brexit. This process is marred by a lack of readily available data concerning the individuals struggling to secure their status or experiencing rejections upon application. Organisations like the Roma Support Group, dedicated to supporting migrant Roma communities, have shed light on the challenging obstacles barring access (Parker and Bica, 2024). These hurdles include language barriers, absence of necessary documentation, and challenges associated with digital exclusion and legal literacy.

Mihai Bica of the Roma Support Group highlighted the increase of Roma families seeking assistance with registration. However, definitive numbers remain elusive. NGOs and legal professionals collaborating with the Roma community emphasise that a significant portion, particularly people on low-income, lack the awareness and means to navigate the complexities of securing their status. This vulnerability exposes them to exploitation and jeopardises their access to essential support from public sector organisations.

The disparities in geographical locations further compound the issue. Roma residing in areas with robust local support systems may have higher success rates in acquiring settled status whilst those living in areas without support services may have lower success rates. Furthermore, Roma NGOs report that some parents lack understanding that a separate application process is required for their children, thereby leaving an indeterminate number of children with uncertain legal status (Parker and Bica, 2024).

Instances of late applications denied by the Home Office are prevalent, often attributed to factors like the absence of a national insurance number and missed deadlines caused by delays related to holidays, particularly since the stricter approach to such applications from August 2023 (Parker and Bica, 2024). Immigration experts stress that securing leave to remain requires proactive engagement and comprehension of bureaucratic and legal procedures, a level of expertise that is notably lacking among many Roma individuals.

Immigration lawyer, Denisa Gannon (Central England Law Centre) further underscores the challenges Roma face in identifying trustworthy organisations offering genuine assistance, given the prevalence of expensive services from private firms that provide no guarantee of securing settled status. The market is inundated with individuals offering help despite lacking the requisite qualifications, propagating further confusion.

The demand for settled status within the Roma community remains substantial, with Gannon's office receiving a steady flow of 15-20 individuals seeking assistance monthly. The structural barriers coupled with the overarching hostile environment and stringent immigration policies have left many individuals in a state of limbo, underscoring the urgent need for comprehensive support mechanisms.

2.2.2. Impact on children residing in care with unclear legal status

To date, there has been limited attention given to the specific impact of Brexit on vulnerable children. Additionally, there has been minimal work done to explore the distinct implications of Brexit for children residing in care. There are currently 82,080 looked after children in England and Wales (Department for Education's data, 2023) . Research by Coram Children's Legal Centre and the South London Refugee Association (2021) highlights that approximately 10% of England's children in care lack British citizenship and are facing unresolved immigration and nationality challenges. This affects at least 18,934 looked after children and care leavers. Of this number, at least 7,733 are looked after children under the age of eighteen. Such challenges not only jeopardise children's care benefits but also elevate risks such as abuse, exploitation, and increased chances of going missing. There is no official data on how many Roma children in care lack appropriate documentation; however, given the complexities surrounding their legal status and the potential challenges they face, it is reasonable to expect that some are at risk.

2.2.3. Discrimination

The literature review underscores that the Roma community's access to children's services has been impeded by a typically heightened sense of mistrust towards authorities. While Roma migration motives echo those of other groups – security, employment, and education – their journey often unfolds amidst pervasive discrimination and marginalisation in their home countries. Unfortunately, the post-Brexit environment has been marked by rising levels of xenophobia and hate crime that disproportionately affect Roma (Clifton-Sprigg and Vujic, 2020). Statistics from the Evidence for Equality National Survey reveals alarming rates: 62% of Gypsy or Traveller people experienced racial assault surpassing that experienced by all other ethnic groups, while 47% of Roma reported being assaulted and 35% endured physical attacks (Butler, 2023).

A 2019 report (Aldridge et al., 2019) found that despite some positive experiences of migration to the UK, Roma people still reported mistreatment by the police, discrimination by neighbours, colleagues or employers, and inability to find work and adequate housing. The 2020 report 'Hate: As Regular as Rain' (Greenfields and Rogers, 2020) reveals that 78% of GRT community members surveyed experience hate speech or crimes frequently, with daily occurrences noted by some. Another 18% reported such incidents happen often, while only 3% stated they occur sometimes. The prevalent forms of hate encountered include exclusion and discrimination within essential services like health and education (94%), reinforcement of negative stereotypes (89%), social media abuse (87%), and media incitement to racial hatred (82%). Notably, 78% of respondents also highlighted school bullying as a significant concern. This early victimisation underscores the urgent need for comprehensive measures to address hate crimes and speech, particularly within educational settings, to prevent poor developmental outcomes and mitigate adverse childhood experiences among Roma community members.

Although comprehensive data is lacking, our literature review shows the existence of biased perspectives regarding Roma culture among professionals involved in child protection. This is often exacerbated by negative stereotypes in the media,

broader vilification of immigrants, lack of government support, insufficient budgets, and limited interest in fostering integration thereby risking further marginalisation of Roma in England. The government's withdrawal from participating in the EU Roma Strategic Framework, the EU Anti-Racist Action Plan and the subsequent loss of funding for Roma integration, has not been addressed.

Covid 19

The COVID-19 pandemic disproportionately affected low-income ethnic minority families in the UK, with the Roma community facing particularly severe challenges (Lecerf, 2021). These challenges were compounded by their existing vulnerabilities, such as limited access to healthcare (with many not registered with a GP), precarious housing conditions, and difficulties in accessing government support programmes like furlough schemes. Research specific to ethnic minorities during the pandemic is limited, but available evidence indicates that these issues were exacerbated during this period (Lewis, 2021). Additionally, the digital divide significantly impacted Roma children's ability to engage in distance learning, as highlighted by the Roma Support Group, which noted that only 20% of the families they assist had access to essential IT devices like tablets or laptops (Lungoci and Ghiurau, 2022). This issue was further complicated by literacy and language barriers, preventing effective participation in online education. Many families were either unaware of the possibility of receiving devices from schools or unable to utilise online tools for learning and communication. To mitigate these barriers, Roma Support Group collaborated with organisations like Turn Around, Traveller Movement, and King's College to provide online tutoring and support in securing necessary technology for the most disadvantaged families. Despite these efforts, children from families lacking community support remained significantly disadvantaged in their educational opportunities during the pandemic.

Policy review conclusion

In conclusion, the past decade has ushered in pivotal policy shifts that have shaped the experiences of Roma families in England. The convergence of factors—the pervasive effects of austerity measures, and the impact of Brexit—has generated multifaceted challenges for Roma communities. Austerity measures, while purportedly aimed at fiscal recovery, have disproportionately affected already marginalised groups, deepening socio-economic inequalities and constraining access to vital support systems for Roma families. Brexit, with its unclear aftermath and the end of vital EU funding earmarked for integration, has cast uncertainty, compounding the challenges faced by Roma communities in navigating legal statuses, facing heightened hate crime risks, and grappling with the loss of crucial support services. The interconnectedness of these elements underscores the urgent need for comprehensive and inclusive policies that prioritise the well-being and integration of Roma, recognising their distinct needs within broader society.

3 Views of social care professionals and lawyers who have worked with Roma families in England

Research with social care professionals and lawyers identified the following issues:

3.1. Summary- survey findings

In total, 13 social care practitioners completed the survey. The roles varied from:

- social worker (7),
- student social worker (2),
- family support worker (2),
- GRT service coordinator (1), and
- youth justice service team leader (1).

Nearly half had worked with 10 or more Roma families, with the remainder working with:

- seven to nine families (1),
- four to six families (2), and
- one to three families (4).

All respondents had worked with Roma families from Romania. Slovakia was the next most common country (7), followed by the Czech Republic (6), Bulgaria (2) and Hungary (2).

In total, 4 legal professionals completed the online survey, two of whom were barristers, and the remainder were solicitors. The number of Roma families' they worked with varied between four to six (2) and seven to nine (2). The countries where the Roma families originated from were:

- Czech Republic (2),
- Romania (2),
- Hungary (1),
- Poland (1) and
- Slovakia (1).
- UK (1)
- Ireland (1)

Although we had limited time and resources to disseminate the surveys, we acknowledge that a low number of professionals took part. Although we don't have any conclusive evidence about this, this may pertain both to work pressures but also that families may not disclose they are Roma, meaning that professionals are often unaware of the ethnic background of the families they are working with.

Responses varied in describing the relationship between Roma families and social care practitioners with some describing it as conflictual, others neither co-operative nor conflictual and a small number describing it as co-operative. It is important to note that due to the relatively small sample size, these findings may not be generalised broadly but provide insight into the range of perspectives within this limited group. A noteworthy observation is the absence of a consistent pattern, as participants described the nature of this relationship in diverse ways.

Professionals' challenges when working with Roma families

Social care practitioners raised several challenges when working with Roma families. These were related to:

- lack of trust,
- language barriers,
- lack of knowledge about child protection process, and
- cultural misunderstandings.

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'I think because of the lack of trust with professionals it takes time to build this up, they may have been let down before.'

'I feel there is a 'fear' associated with services and this makes people withdraw.'

'My main barrier has been language. I feel the Roma community are disadvantaged as people who come into contact with social services who do not speak English have a more difficult experience on the whole.'

'I feel professionals try to explain the process but understanding this process takes time and repetition.'

'I do not think that there is a good understanding of UK child protection legislation or of UK standards around child protection.'

'Families may not appreciate risks as seen by social workers.'

'I think it is a different way of raising their children.'

'Roma families often do not understand that they are doing something wrong.'

'They do not understand why children's services are involved. They were able to do certain things in their own country. What is the difference now that they live in the UK?'

Legal professionals identified several challenges facing Roma families when interacting with the legal system over child protection issues. These related to Roma families' lack of awareness and understanding of child protection processes and shifts to remote court hearings negatively impacting digitally excluded Roma families. The majority of respondents believed that this shift negatively impacted their client's ability to fully engage in court proceedings. Primarily, the reasons related to digital exclusion and the online communication barriers, leading to further isolation and disengagement by their Roma clients.

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> 'Child Protection process often appears to be an alien concept. Clients can also present as being confused by an incompatibility with experiences and standards in the country of origin. It can be difficult to put this in context given my own lack of awareness of child protection procedures in Eastern Europe.'
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> **'Remote hearings are a disaster. The communication difficulties are already enhanced for Roma clients, remote hearing only increases their isolation and lack of engagement with the process.'**
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> 'Access to technology is a possible issue. It is also much harder to gauge if a client has any additional learning needs that require support if you are interacting over a screen. Physically attending a court does mean that the process is more real for participants.'

Transient and unsettled ways of life were identified by some participants as a further barrier to establishing and maintaining a relationship with Roma families, characterising such concerns in the following ways:

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> 'Maintaining contact, changing phone numbers.'
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> **'Moving out of [the] area frequently.'**
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> 'Understanding that timekeeping can be a problem.'

Similar challenges were identified by the legal professionals with the additional challenges of working with interpreters and instructing experts.

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> 'Few, if any, have an in-depth understanding of the particular cultural and social issues faced by Roma families. Language barriers can be particularly problematic.'
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> **'When I have instructed a culturally appropriate expert it has been a significant factor in achieving a positive outcome.'**

Most respondents did not believe the cultural identity of Roma children in care was supported. Indeed, one social worker noted the urgent need for Roma families to be encouraged to foster and/or adopt to improve the experiences of looked after Roma children. Consequently, all respondents believed that the experience of Roma families with children's services needed to be improved.

Good practice identified by social care practitioners and lawyers

Models of good practice were identified by both respondent groups. For social care practitioners building and establishing trust on an individual and wider community level either directly or through intermediaries was identified as key. For legal professionals, greater cultural awareness and respect were considered key features to facilitating fair and effective interactions.

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'The role of social work needs to be improved with [the] Roma community. There needs to be community based social work to build a relationship and trust.'

'Key factor is building up trust and relationships. One local authority identified an issue of sexual exploitation in an area of town and ran youth groups in the evening in the community centre. Youth workers, police, charities and schools worked together and engaged with Roma to promote the group and social workers visited in turns. The multi-agency work helped educate children and explain the risks of adults they met on [the] street and prevent exploitation and safeguard the children.'

'I've had several successes, building a rapport with extended community helps. Being reliable and able to provide practical support. Being an advocate, discussing concerns that professionals have and being able to de-escalate situations/concerns.'

3.2. Summary - interview findings

We conducted six semi-structured interviews. In total, three social workers participated, one of whom occupied a dual community member and expert role. Similarly, two other participants held dual roles having both legal backgrounds and being community experts through their Roma consultant, interpreter, training and advocacy positions. The final participant was a community expert having been involved in directly supporting Roma families and offering engagement support for social care professionals. All participants had direct experience of working with Roma families within the context of child protection.

How interviewees described Roma families' experiences with children's services

Overall, most participants believed Roma families' experiences with children's services to be poor either resulting from direct discrimination or wider systemic failures within social care leading to inadequate support for Roma families. The reasons behind the poor and discriminatory practices identified were linked to wider, entrenched negative and stigmatising societal attitudes.

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'There's a whole ideology, government political agendas, that there are all thieves, and beggars, and no good. So, it is that whole agenda…That is a challenge that there's a lot of stuff in the media about that.'

'You're a beggar, you're a Gypsy. So, I think it's an institutional thing. And I think some colleagues in the office would label Roma, and not want to work with them. Be clear of them, want to be clear of them.'

'It is explicit, and it's implicit. So, they're taking these deeply embedded, implicit feelings, beliefs about Gypsies. And, of course, you know, part of being a professional social worker, of being an accountable practitioner, of being a registered social worker, all of that is about accountability, isn't it? And part of that accountability is actively challenging yourself. Your own biases and prejudices.'

'But mostly the practice is really poor. Communication on every level is poor. Yes, at every level. So, keeping informed, but not just being kept informed, but really, really understanding what that means, the implications, what is expected of us.'

Pervasive stigmatising and discriminating attitudes and practices towards Roma meant fear and mistrust typified families' initial engagement with children's services, compounded by the deeply embedded belief and fear that their children would ultimately be removed.

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> **'All I know is that I work across the levels, and whenever you mention social services to my families, it's not a happy face. It's a mistrust.'**
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> 'I would say a lot of it is sort of characterised by fear. There's fear, there's mistrust. I think this sense that social work means your children are going to be taken away is really deeply embedded. And I think that doesn't come from nowhere. It's from Roma families' experiences of their own family, of other families that they know. It may not be based on that kind of empirical data that they're aware of, but it's from their experience of families, of cousins, of friends, of, you know, 'This is what's happened in our families, in our network.'

Roma families' experiences in their countries of origin were also identified as contributing to their initial fear and mistrust of children's services in England.

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> **'They are very fearful, often based on some things they hear from friends, family, or based on experiences from countries of origin, or how things work in countries of origin. So, often they do lots of things which work against them, because they think that that's the right thing to do, that's what they should be doing, and they don't understand that actually it's counterproductive or damaging.'**
>
> 'And then, when they start to have contact with the state, it's not supportive, it's not helpful, and that reinforces, then, doesn't it, and consolidates the fear and the mistrust that they brought with them.'

Participants identified that in practice they observed a speeding up and escalation of Roma cases, which they considered were linked to stigmatising attitudes and systemic pressures and failings.

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‘What we have seen, again through the front line, is that often if things escalate really quickly from safeguarding to child protection, and in some cases really quick child protection investigations, sometimes children are being removed very quickly, and then, only then, a proper investigation is being done.’

‘I've seen it directly in practice. It's this kind of speeding up. It's like, - Oh, they're neglecting these children, they're abusing their children, they won't engage with us, and I can't communicate with them, and everything is all getting a bit too much... I'm overwhelmed, my caseloads are massive, I'm not having good supervision, I'm not being supported. Get them out. Get the children out.’

Once Roma children are looked after by local authorities, a few participants raised that their Roma culture was not maintained or indeed considered in relation to placements.

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‘I certainly don't think their needs for maintaining contact with their culture are met. We worked on a case where children were removed very quickly. After two years of being in care, it was found that, actually, maybe they shouldn't have been removed in the first place, and by that time they had no language they could communicate, with their parents.’

‘Local Authorities are failing to maintain their cultural identity. There is no direct system, or a concrete way of saying, ‘Well, yes, we have removed the child, but we are going to show that we are going to support them to maintain their traditions, their roots, their language.’ Many of these children are losing their language, and they are being encouraged to lose their language, their culture, their tradition. Some of the foster carers don't even have any idea about doing a cultural awareness course.’

Roma families' barriers to positive engagement with children's services identified by interviewees

A main challenge facing Roma families when interacting with children's services, as identified by participants, related to language barriers and limited literacy that impeded communication and understanding. The first language of most Roma families would be Romanes. However, most commonly interpreters used by social workers, or in court, will speak the second or third language of the families, for instance Slovakian, Romanian or Czech.

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'We did a joint visit, and they [social workers] were using acronyms and things, and I'm thinking, - You've got to talk to them [parents] at a basic level.'

'I often see cases where the problem is that services feel they provide information, but the communication is such a big problem that even if they provide information, it doesn't necessarily mean that the families will understand that information...You can't deliver one session on something to people who are illiterate. You need to deliver several sessions, so people can memorise, can ask questions, and that sort of thing. If people can't read information, you have to provide visuals which will support what you are doing. If you have limited education, abstract sort of examples will not work, you need to think of practical examples. So, you really need to adapt how you work with Roma families, and you can't deliver support which is sometimes available as a standard type of support.'

'I am thinking that a very good example is with translated court documents which families are provided with. Usually it's in second language, the language of the country the family is coming from. So, families will say they can read, and they can understand the information, so professionals make assumptions, if they have those documents, they will understand, and it is not the case...they will only understand certain sentences or words, and they attribute certain meanings to those words which are not correct, if the legal or difficult language is used...So, an example would be if the family has signed, or parents have signed an agreement. They don't really understand what they are signing, but it's taken very seriously in court.'

In addition, as most interpreters were not necessarily from the Roma community, this meant misunderstandings and assumptions often occurred, in many cases to the detriment of Roma families.

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> 'So, there could be an interpreter who has no prejudices, is trying to do a good job, but they may not understand that they are translating for somebody who is using this language as a second language, so they don't understand the limitations. So obviously, that will create some miscommunication, because they will make assumptions that people will understand the words they are using, and if people are giving strange answers, it will be attributed to something else rather than to the fact these people don't understand. There will be some who will have a very good understanding, who would pick up the fact that somebody doesn't speak good language, will make the professionals aware, and who will be sympathetic. So that can help communication. But there will be also those who have prejudices, and they often won't do anything to help the professionals, and they also sometimes knowingly try to influence what's happening, by providing their own perspective on Roma, or their own interpretation on what they are hearing. So, it varies greatly.'

Several participants highlighted that social workers often believe that they have fully informed the family about the reasons for their involvement, but frequently families do not understand and hence were unable to make the required changes, leading to the label of 'non-engagement'. Hence, a label of 'non-engagement', when uncritically accepted, could have significant impacts on a family.

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> '...lack of understanding of the role of the social worker. Often not very good understanding, or lack of understanding of the reasons for the involvement, how they need to engage, what they need to do...So, often, professionals think they have done quite a lot of work, and explained things, and do not realise families don't understand most of it, or don't understand what it means. Or sometimes non-engagement is seen as something where families don't want to engage, where, for example, families just don't know how to go about certain things.'
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> **'I will challenge people on non-engagement. 'So, what do you mean about non-engagement? What did they not do? Be specific. Be very clear, very specific.'**

A lack of cultural sensitivity and curiosity was identified by participants as impeding effective and respectful relationships between Roma families and practitioners. Some participants raised how some practitioners' lack of awareness of Roma culture and history meant, in some circumstances, actions were being misinterpreted and misjudged.

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'What gets me is that they don't want to learn about the culture, do you know what I mean? Not inquisitive, it's more blame, and things...I don't think the social workers from the local authority were utilising [Roma NGO's] resources, at all... I just think they didn't use what was offered to them.'

'One of the safeguarding or child protection concerns will be school attendance. And there is a difference between an understanding of what good parenting is in Roma culture and our understanding in the UK. So, in Roma culture, a good parent is expected to look after their child who has a cold at home, not to let the child out, and everything. And then they are told that if their child has a cold, they need to send them to school. So, what they are hearing is we are asking them to be a bad parent. You know? 'What's going on? Why are those people telling me to be a bad parent?' But the school was probably concerned about poor attendance and thought the child was well enough to attend. So, without a cultural understanding, on both sides, of expectation, and so on, just nothing happens, the problem continues. People are seeing each other in a negative light, when on both sides the intentions are positive. So, there's lots of misunderstanding, cultural misunderstanding, on both sides, really. A lot of assumptions, based on our own cultural experiences, and that sort of thing...It's not a choice, it's a must, you have to really look into that person's cultural background, in order to understand- not to excuse them, but in order to understand how this operates, how this person is seeing things, understanding things.'

Identified challenges facing social workers engaging with Roma families related to mistrust impeding engagement, social workers' conflicting demands and pressures leading to a loss of a reflective space.

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'I think that the fact that social workers don't have much time, and have too much caseload, means they can't provide the appropriate support to Roma families. Roma families really need to build positive relationships…But in many places, people just are too busy, and they can't build that positive relationship, and spend time understanding the Roma families, and so on…If you have people who are from a different culture, don't speak the language, have literacy problems, the normal timescales will not be enough for them, and for the social workers to do it justice, when they do an assessment of that family.'

'If you have supervision booked in, and all it is, is talk about your cases. Not what I would call effective supervision. Because the managers themselves haven't got time. I mean, by the time we've got through cases, and things, it's an hour and a half gone. So, there's no time there isn't any time, but there isn't the will to even if we came together and did peer supervision, or group supervision, there's different ways of doing things. But unless let's say, me, as a social worker, I would have to do it. And then, because there's no management oversight, or will in that, after a while, it just dies off.'

'It's about the systems that social workers are operating in…They're often turning up to you know, presenteeism. They're sick, but they're working, because they're understaffed. They've got too many cases. They are overwhelmed. So, where there is a case that, to them, produces feelings of fear and anxiety, that cognitive dissonance, they want to get rid of it, because it's uncomfortable… I love being in this profession, and I think it's a really important profession. But, you know, sometimes I feel ashamed, when I see some of the practice…I also have to remind myself that social workers are tasked with a really difficult job, and in really difficult circumstances. They're not supported, like I said, they're firefighting, and the whole multidisciplinary bit doesn't work. Because, again, it's not just social workers who support families, is it? It's a multi-agency response.'

Good practice identified by interviewees

Participants identified the following features as central to establishing effective relationships when working with Roma families:

- engaging with Roma history, culture and organisations,
- early intervention,
- transparency,
- reliability, and
- respectful curiosity.

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'One of the things that the Roma Support Group helped me to understand was the history. So, they gave me a lot of literature, so that I could understand what they [Roma community] had been through, and what they were going through. Even historically, from their own country, how they're seen, the lowest of the low, and everything.'

'It's not necessarily that you always have to have a Roma advocate, because it would be impossible to implement. But you need to have well-trained social workers, who have access to good information and resources and understand the cultural competence. This is key when working with people from different backgrounds...However, you also need to be aware that not every Roma organisation will be able to provide good information, and appropriate information, in that sort of context. So, if somebody is just promoting Roma culture, that does not necessarily mean they have a good understanding of how to work with Roma families in safeguarding and a child protection context.'

'So, I think it's people really not making any assumptions, people really looking at the situation, and doing the fact finding first, and then addressing, and working with the family, using the appropriate tools, based on the good information.'

'I think if you can get over the fear stage, if you have a social worker who is open, who is respectful, who does what they say they're going to do, in terms of just basic things, like turning up when they say they're going to turn up, making that phone call...If you develop that trust, and that trust which is built on respectful curiosity, and not assuming that you're the expert, then I've actually seen some really good interventions, where that fear has been replaced by trust, and then by hope.'

4 Views of Roma families about their experiences with children's services in England

In total, 26 Roma parents attended the discussion group meetings; they were from:

- Slovakia (11),
- Czech Republic (4),
- Romania (10), and
- Portugal (1).

All participants had contact with children's services and some of them were involved in the child protection process and, in some cases, had children removed from their care.

Discussion group meetings with Roma parents identified the following issues:

Roma families' perceptions of children's services

Most participants felt scared of social workers. Fear of social workers was well established in communities. Stories about negative experiences with social workers spread through storytelling and this also affected families who were never involved with social workers themselves. Fear was connected to a sense of powerlessness and a lack of control over what was happening.

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'I fear them. I don't have any more young children, but I look after other family members' children and I want to keep them safe in the house and I worry when they sometimes go on the street that if something happens, someone will call the police and social workers and it could easily escalate into chaos.'

'We know that social services are not coming for something good and we know they come for a problem and as a mum and knowing that other mums had their children removed from their care, of course I feel scared, of course it's something that you don't know how to react to and what would be the best thing to do and how to respond best but it's a big fear based on what we know other families have experienced.'

'I feel unprotected, afraid. When somebody comes to us and tries to intervene in our family we feel first that we are unprotected, we feel that they insist to try to do something bad in our family, even when we have good conditions, we feel that they don't respect our rights, we feel that they don't have empathy and they don't want to help, they just want to take something from you as a parent, they don't have a heart, they don't have feelings.'

'If you do something- they say you need to do it differently. I feel 'not free'. They never ask mum and dad - how do you feel? I feel scared, anxious because I don't know how the social worker thinks. If something happens to children (for instance if they fall), the social workers always say - it's the parents' fault.'

Roma families' barriers to positive engagement with children's services

Most participants didn't understand the child protection process and were aware that this created a power imbalance between them and children's services. Overall, many participants felt that social workers required too much of them. Unannounced visits and checking of contents of food cupboards/fridges were mentioned as being particularly difficult.

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'When the social worker asked me to do something, I never questioned that, I accepted everything. Chair of the child protection conference said that I had a right to ask questions, that parents do not need to agree with everything, and it was only then that we [parents] understood that social workers should explain the process to us, including our rights.'

'Being part of meetings when I didn't understand anything, multi-agency meetings, was really difficult. I was there and everyone was talking about me, and I didn't understand anything, and I felt invisible.'

'It depends on who you meet. If you meet someone good, who understands and has empathy, it's great. If you meet someone without empathy that person is going to do whatever they want with your family and you need to have power to speak to this person because if you don't speak to them, that person is going to do whatever they want with your family. This is very important, when somebody like that comes it's important to have the words you need and think how you talk to them because they insist on taking your children. Just a little bit of concern they might have about one child - they want to take everyone.'

'They come to your house, they start to ask things about you, and they don't stop with just one [question] and they keep asking from this and that and it becomes something more complex.'

'During the social worker's involvement, I was working, and the social worker came to my house twice whilst I was at work. My older daughter opened the door, and the social worker went to the kitchen, opened all the cupboards, and she said that the food was not appropriate for children.'

'You cannot communicate with them, because they go [social workers], they search in your fridge if you have food, they can call the police. Communication with them cannot be free, they don't tell you- don't worry, we are not here to take your children.'

However, some participants reported sharing learning about child protection with other families, helping them understand expectations and norms in the UK. Moreover, participants who had access to support from community organisations seemed more empowered and spoke about understanding their rights, including the right to challenge or request a change of an interpreter or a social worker.

A creative or visual map highlighting communication pathways was identified as a tool which would be particularly helpful for Roma families to see how some families navigate social services, but also for the social workers to learn about such processes too.

> **'I didn't have any issues with social workers because I learned from others [who were involved with social services]. For example, for children to go to school, have good attendance, for children not to make problems in the public, not stay outside too late, etc. In this country you have to be more careful, stricter. In our country you can do certain things, in this country you can't because it's against the law.'**

Participants noted that they frequently struggled to work through interpreters who most often spoke the second or third language of Roma families and who also sometimes carried prejudiced views about Roma into their work.

> 'I had to work with interpreters. I was a bit mistrustful about interpreters. I signed some documents that said I agreed for extended involvement with social workers, and I didn't know what they were, I only later found out what I signed. The social worker (who always takes notes and writes something when visiting the house) just asked me to sign the document and I did.'
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> **'Interpreters also need to be trustworthy - because sometimes interpreters intentionally provide poor service, and this can have a negative impact on the way people engage with professionals or the outcomes of the cases.'**

Sources of support most frequently mentioned were schools, neighbours from other minoritised backgrounds and community specialists. However, some families felt too ashamed to ask for help.

> **'I didn't ask anyone for help because I didn't want to tell anybody.'**

Roma families' experiences with children's services

Participants often felt that some of their cultural norms, and ways of doing things, were misunderstood. For example, practices around food, such as cooking late in the evening, putting sugar in baby food or tasting food before giving it to babies, their 'open doors' culture and welcoming people in their homes, living conditions (especially small houses and many family members living together), and early marriage.

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'People in Romania grew up in small houses, this was normal. They cannot afford big houses because they are expensive and this is also part of our culture because we like to be together, to be 'open doors'.'

'I grew up not having everything, especially sweet food. When my mum bought a biscuit, this was a rare occasion for me and my siblings. We could not say to mum - I don't want to eat something and here [in the UK] we have everything we want because we have a better life but in Roma culture, this memory is still inside us. When I don't buy some food for my daughter, other family members say - oh, she doesn't want to pay £2 for this. I go back to Slovakia every year, but my daughter already knows what is not healthy and what not to eat. My dad criticises me and asks me to buy even sweets for my daughter - only because he thinks that I should give to my daughter everything I didn't have before. And this is very hard to explain to social workers.'

Some participants felt they were treated differently because of their ethnicity and had doubts that the same rules apply to British families.

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> 'I believe that social workers have a different approach to non-English families. I believe that English families have more rights. Children get treated differently in schools too.'
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> **'Why do they ask us to meet these high standards if other English families don't?'**
>
> 'My granddaughter is 4 years old; she was eating, and she bit her finger and we tried to clean her wound and the school looked at the injury and called the family. By the time we arrived, the school had already taken her to the hospital to examine her. The hospital examined her whole body, and the social worker came to my house, checking all children, checking everything in the house, if children were eating, if children had clothes, how we live. When the social worker saw that everything was OK, she closed the case. But the way this happened was traumatic and left a huge mark on us. The social worker said -You are a good family, like we are some kind of exception.'

Some participants also challenged how children's services look after Roma children in care, and it was apparent that most families were either not aware of kinship care or were worried that by putting themselves forward, they could end up being investigated themselves.

> ❝
>
> **'Even if my sister is about to lose her child and I tell social services that I can take this child, they are going to ask me to provide too many things - that is the main problem.'**
>
> 'If it is within my family, I would like to take this child, but I am not aware of this option.'
>
> **'I was looking after my sister's son and later on, I had problems with social workers regarding my own children. Looking after my sister's son triggered an investigation regarding my own children. Social workers started examining my house, pointing out what wasn't right, the social worker was even visiting the school examining my child's body alleging that his eczema was bruise and asking to examine him in the hospital... I remember a lot of criticism by the social worker- to cut his hair, to feed him differently, etc. I sometimes didn't have time for my own children because the social worker was demanding so many things from me.'**

When asked why they thought some Roma families in contact with children's services sought to transfer cases to their countries of origin, most participants thought that this might be because some families find the legal system too difficult to navigate in England, and that parenting norms/expectations are likely to be more familiar in countries of origin and linguistic barriers are also removed. Participants also mentioned that there are no non-consensual adoptions in their countries of origin. We asked our participants about this issue because our analysis of the care proceedings cases involving Roma families (see 6.4. below) showed that twelve out of sixteen cases featured requests to transfer care proceedings back to the country of origin.

Good practice identified by Roma families

Participants spoke about positive experiences with social workers and what made their experiences different. This included:

- professionals taking interest in a family (asking about children),
- being kind and polite to all family members,
- eating with families/ accepting refreshments,
- asking for permission to look through the house instead of just doing it,
- having a positive and encouraging approach,
- acknowledging progress made by parents,
- being respectful and listening to parents,
- sharing knowledge and showing how certain things can be done differently (such as healthy diet or managing difficult behaviour),
- helping families access health services,
- helping families with financial difficulties, and
- explaining parenting norms and expectations in England in a clear way.

However, some positive actions were interpreted as negative by some Roma families. For instance, one participant was reluctant to accept financial support provided by a social worker for a fear of being seen as unable to provide for her family independently.

> "

> 'The new social worker said, after the first visit, that she does not see the reason why social services needed to be involved with our family. The new social worker was better. She was interested in the family, she asked about children, she was nice and polite to everyone in the family. She was very nice, she asked for permission from me, for example - I am very sorry, but I have to see if children have appropriate food, can I please have a look at your kitchen? She asked for permission and that made all the difference.'

> **'I met another social worker, who was involved as an independent social worker and this social worker was really good and treated me very differently, she was really kind and treated me well, and ate together with us when in our house.'**

> 'Sometimes, the social worker was helpful, and she showed me how to manage children better. In some ways, she was helpful. In some families it can be helpful when social workers are involved, families can learn something different from what they used to know. For example - sugar. In our families, people use sugar a lot. I personally learned about the harmful impact of sugar from a social worker. This was hugely impactful, and I stopped allowing my daughter to drink Coca-Cola and other fizzy drinks. For this, I often get comments in my family 'you are so white [non-Roma]'. I explained to my family that sugar can damage your teeth in the future.'

> **'I had a very good social worker who respected me, listened to me and this mattered a lot.'**

A number of Roma families agreed that professionals having improved knowledge about Roma culture and history would be helpful in creating a more equitable relationship between children's services and Roma families. Participants also mentioned the importance of social workers understanding their constrained financial circumstances, as they often felt that they were not able to meet expected living standards in the UK. Use of community mediators and support workers was also suggested as a strategy to improve engagement as well as provide support for people to make necessary changes through modelling good practice, use of culturally accessible examples, and visual tools. Finally, participants explained that social workers should clearly explain child protection procedures, what needs to change and how, from the point of view of professionals, as well as encouraging parents to ask questions about their case and ensure that families understand everything which will take place.

5 Child safeguarding practice reviews in England that involve Roma families

We analysed three cases involving Roma families which were available on the NSPCC's National case review repository.

Analysis of the child safeguarding practice reviews in England involving Roma families identified the following issues:

Lack of trust in services

In the case of 'Child FD17' practitioners found the parents reluctant to share their history and information with professionals. This was said not to be unusual with Roma families who are anxious about what use will be made of such personal information.

In the case of 'Child S' the wider Roma community did not report abuse of the child despite their knowledge and concern about what was happening to the child.

Issues with interpreting and language barriers

All three reviews explicitly mention issues with interpreting, especially in regard to Romanes. In addition, in the absence of available interpreters, professionals relied on a perpetrator (case 'Child S') or a survivor (case 'Charlie and Sam') to interpret for other family members rather than using professional interpreting services.

Lack of understanding about Roma culture

In the case of 'Child S' the report does not differentiate between Czech culture and Roma culture, instead conflating the two. The two later reports highlight a lack of cultural understanding from practitioners and agencies. Furthermore, in the case of 'Child FD17', responsibility for cultural knowledge was not institution-wide and was placed on one individual and subsequently lost when the practitioner left the service.

Lack of communication and information sharing across jurisdictions

In the case of 'Child FD17' the social worker did not contact the Slovakian welfare authorities, although they wanted to, as they did not receive advice on how to do so from their managers. The information, once acquired, was significant. In the case of 'Child S' who was subject to intervention by children's services in the Czech Republic and who had already spent some time in foster care, it is stated 'If the Czech authorities had shared the reports that 'Child S' had moved to England and their concerns about care of 'Child S' with agencies in England, there is no guarantee that professionals in England would have been able to establish contact with 'Child S'. However, a request could have been made for the Police to make enquiries with the half-sister if information had been provided about them'. This demonstrates a lack of collaborative working and information sharing between children's services in the UK and other European countries.

6 Analysis of the care proceedings cases that involve Roma families, available through the Lexis+ portal database

Analysis of the legal cases involving Roma families identified the following issues:

6.1. Perceptions of parents' ability to provide adequate levels of childcare

Common themes emerged regarding **parents' ability to provide levels of childcare perceived to be adequate by statutory bodies.** These were influenced by several intersectional factors:

- In six of the nine cases in which the mother's **age** is mentioned in the judgement, the mother is under the age of twenty. In cases where the mothers are young, there has often been (in three cases) prior engagement with children's services involving the young mothers themselves who as children had been in contact with children's services.

- In five of the sixteen cases, parents explicitly disclosed **difficulties that they have experienced accessing welfare benefits and suitable accommodation**.

- In six of the cases, it is explicitly stated that parents have **issues with their immigration status**, this includes being trafficking survivors (three cases), deportation and administrative removal experience, and not exercising their treaty rights. Although not explicitly stated in the judgments, this may have impacted their ability to access welfare benefits.

- In two out of three cases involving survivors of trafficking, it is unclear if they received support or were (as required) referred to the National Referral Mechanism.[11]

- In total, three of the sixteen mothers were assessed as lacking litigation capacity - although it is unclear if interpreters used spoke Romanes or the second/third language of the mothers involved which can significantly impact assessment outcomes. Another mother had a diagnosis of learning difficulties and paranoid schizophrenia which presumably considerably affected her ability to engage with the courts.

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[11] Providing support to those with trafficking indicators is a statutory duty: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/modern-slavery-how-to-identify-and-support-victims

6.2. Reasons for children's services' interventions

The judgments cite the reasons for children's services' interventions regarding the families. Most of the cases include multiple types of harm and complex family circumstances. The most common reasons include:

Neglect (nine cases)

Children left at home alone, failure to attend medical appointments, failure to attend dental appointments, low school attendance, children presenting as dirty and unkempt, household cleanliness and hygiene. In three cases a lack of antenatal care triggered proceedings.[12] In addition, there are two cases of young mothers with previous experience of state care in their countries of origin who had absconded from 'mother and baby' units.

Parents involved in criminal proceedings

In four of the cases parents were involved in criminal proceedings including domestic violence, drugs offences and offences relating to child abuse and child neglect, thereby presenting serious risk to the wellbeing and safety of the children involved.

Physical harm

Physical harm was identified in four cases ranging from over chastisement to causing serious physical harm.

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12 This issue has been reflected in earlier reports documenting barriers experienced by Roma women in accessing antenatal care: https://www.maternityaction.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/MothersVoices2018-FINAL.pdf

6.3. Parental engagement with the court process

Factors impacting parent's ability to engage with the process include:

Mistrust of the system

Mistrust of the system, especially of the social workers and professionals involved in assessing parenting skills. This included parental refusal to sign documents, however it is not clear if the documents were properly explained to parents in a manner and language that they could fully understand. Some parents also felt that the wider Roma community were discriminated against. Whilst this may have been the case, as the judge noted in one case, it was difficult for parents to evidence this.

Interpreters and communication

Judges often reflected on the importance of consistent, high-quality interpreters (although it is not clear if this refers to translation in Romanes or Romanian / Slovakian etc.) and the importance of clear communication between professionals and families. In one case, lack of interpreters caused a 16-month delay in a court hearing during which children spent time in foster care. This resulted in children not learning the first language of their parents, Romanes.

> **"**
>
> 'Although the placement has proved to be a very positive placement for J and E as the guardian noted in her initial analysis the placement is not a cultural match and the children are therefore learning and understanding only English with their current carers. One of the most concerning consequences of this is that mother and daughters are unable to converse with each other during contact save through an interpreter. Whatever the circumstances which brought about the need for state intervention in the life of this family, and whatever the level of her engagement with the process since, it is almost unbearable trying to imagine the feelings of a mother unable to speak to her own small children in her own tongue.'
>
> **[2015] EWCA Civ 1112 (para 50)**

Engagement with parenting assessments/ contact

Reasons for not engaging with parenting assessments and contact (also commonly referred to as 'family time') included these being scheduled when parents had to work and a lack of finances to reach the location where this would occur. Often observations made at contact were found to lead to escalation in the proceedings which may have also made parents unwilling to attend such sessions.

Judges' comments on Roma identity

Often the judges highlighted the difficulties and prejudice faced by the Roma community or the importance of maintaining Roma cultural identity. This was particularly noted in response to bias demonstrated by the local authorities or Guardians.

> **"**
>
> 'My decision will determine whether ED grows up in the Czech Republic, where full respect will be paid to his Czech Roma ethnicity and where it is likely that the parental link will be maintained, or whether he grows up in the UK as an English boy to become, in adulthood, an Englishman. On this latter footing, being realistic, his Czech Roma heritage will either be extinguished or reduced to insignificance.'
>
> **[2014] EWHC 3388 (Fam) (Para 1)**

Despite a number of barriers impacting parent's ability to engage with the court process there were examples of good practice in which parents engaged fully and were commended by the judges. In one case, despite being engaged in intense forensic scrutiny by both the criminal and family courts over many months, parents showed substantial commitment to these proceedings. Judges commended them for their reliability in attending court and giving instructions to their legal teams. In the same case, the courts showed great awareness of difficulties that parents may have in taking part in court proceedings due to linguistic barriers and lack of familiarity with the court processes in England. Consequently, they took 'all steps that can be taken' to support parents' meaningful participation in court processes.[13]

> **"**
>
> 'This court is acutely aware of those difficulties and is very conscious of the background of the families in this case and has sought to ensure that all steps that can be taken have been, to ensure these proceedings have been conducted in a way that enable the parents to properly and effectively participate.'

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13 Useful resource for judiciary is the Equal Treatment Bench Book, which includes tips for better engagement with Roma litigants in courts (p.224)

6.4. Transfer requests

Many proceedings occurred across jurisdictions with transfer requests often made by the parents under Article 15 Brussels IIa: Transfer of Public Law Care Proceedings[14] prior to Brexit or the Hague Convention after 31 December 2020[15] (12 cases out of 16). Of the requests made:

- seven were dismissed,

- one was withdrawn by a parent,

- one was partially granted regarding 2/4 subject children,

- one was granted but subsequently appealed by the local authority and Guardian.

Reasons for transfer requests included:

Expectations of more favourable outcomes abroad

Cases explicitly mention more favourable outcomes in a country of origin. This includes:

- positive viability assessments of family members by Romanian authorities but negative assessments in England,

- children who would be returned to parental care abroad but made subject to child protection proceedings and adoption in England, and

- families who were deemed capable of looking after their other children in their country of origin but not in the UK.

Family support in country of origin

Alternative carers were often based in the country of origin and not in England and it was often argued by parents that it would be easier to assess these potential carers if proceedings were transferred. Family members also had homes parents could live in as part of an extended family, meaning that they wouldn't be reliant on welfare support.

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14 BIIA - Art 15 of Council Regulation (EC) No 2201/2003 of 27 November 2003 Concerning Jurisdiction and the Recognition and Enforcement of Judgments in Matrimonial Matters and in Matters of Parental Responsibility, repealing Regulation (EC) No 1347/2000 (Brussels IIA) (2003) OJ L 338/1 ('BIIA') - When a local authority issues care proceedings over a child who is a foreign EU national, the English court must have jurisdiction under the EU's Brussels IIa Regulation (BIIa) to take substantive decisions for their protection under Part IV of the Children Act 1989. Even if the English court has primary jurisdiction, in defined circumstances and in the best interests of the child, care proceedings may be transferred to another Member State under Article 15, BIIa.

15 Jurisdiction to hear care proceedings is governed by the 1996 Hague Convention: Warrington Borough Council v T and Others [2021] EWFC 68, sub nom Warrington Borough Council v W (Care Proceedings: Jurisdiction) [2022] 1 FLR 1371. See also Public Children Law After Brexit' (Lawsociety.org.uk, 2022) <https://www.lawsociety.org.uk/en/topics/brexit/public- children-law-after-brexit> accessed 6 June 2022 and for a simple explanation, '3.1 Cross Border Child Protection Cases (Hague Convention)' (Kent and Medway Council, 2023) <www.proceduresonline.com/kentandmedway/chapters/p_cross_border_hague.html> accessed 15 April 2023

No non-consensual (forced) adoption in other European countries

England is unusual in Europe in permitting adoption without parental consent. Other states do not practise this.

Better understanding of Roma cultural norms and removal of language barriers

Parents felt that they would be judged and understood better by the courts in their country of origin, and that transfer would remove the need for interpreters.

Loss of Roma language and identity for Roma children in care in England

Due to lack of placements in Roma families in England, Roma children in care are likely to lose connection with their culture.

Reasons given for the refusal of transfer requests included:

- Children not wishing to leave England.

- The advantages of stability and emotional security outweighing the need to preserve cultural identity.

- The UK courts being deemed better placed to undertake fact-finding, ongoing police investigations in England.

- A lack of disclosure/ knowledge about the procedures and systems of the courts in the country of origin.

Conclusion

In this section we draw together the themes that emerged from our findings and use them to answer the questions we set out in the introduction.

1 What does available data tell us about the involvement of Roma families with children's services?

The literature and policy reviews show the limitation of the official Department of Education's data on Roma migrant population in contact with children's services, resulting from lack of disaggregation of the populations in administrative data collected on the categories of Gypsy and Roma groups. In addition, there is a problem with inconsistency in data collection across government departments. For example, the Department for Education collects data for Gypsy and Roma children as one group and Irish Traveller children as a separate group in England, whilst the Census 2021 data is collected for Gypsies and Travellers as one group and Roma as a separate group in England and Wales.

Identifying the reasons for increasing numbers of Gypsy/Roma children in care poses a significant challenge. Furthermore, due to the merging of Gypsy, Roma (and sometimes Traveller data) across government departments, it is difficult to determine accurately whether Roma families have a disproportionate involvement with children's services.

Recommendations have, repeatedly and over a long period of time, been made to disaggregate the data between Gypsy, Roma and Traveller groups by ethnicity (Greenfields et al., 2015; Allen, 2022). However, these recommendations have not been actioned in England in government data, nor in much of the literature. In failing to do so, such data may offer a general picture of children's services' interventions in England that impact Gypsy/Roma households but does not offer the nuance or insight needed to accurately state the particularities of to the experiences of UK based Roma families. Moreover, without relevant data, policymakers risk operating on assumptions or generalisations, potentially leading to ineffective or even detrimental policies.

2 What factors contribute to Roma families' involvement with children's services?

Discrimination and inequality

The involvement of Roma families with children's services in England is shaped by a complex interplay of various factors that influence their experiences and legal outcomes. Discrimination plays a significant role in this phenomenon. The Roma community's historical persecution in Europe has created a lasting legacy of fear and mistrust of authority, making it difficult for them to engage with child protection investigations. Communication problems, fear of authority, and a history of discrimination create a challenging environment for effective engagement and understanding between the Roma community and children's services in England.

The literature review highlights the Roma community's heightened mistrust towards authorities, which hampers their engagement with children's services. Post-Brexit, rising levels of xenophobia and hate crimes have further exacerbated their vulnerability. Furthermore, lack of cultural competence amongst social workers, negative stereotypes in the media, and a lack of government support contribute to the risk of further marginalisation.

The primary research findings reveal that Roma families' experiences with children's services are often negative. Broader societal attitudes, budget constraints, loss of services, and conflicting demands on social workers' time contribute to such experiences. In addition, the socio-economic and legal circumstances of the Roma migrant population remain under-researched in the British context, hindering understanding of their needs and targeted responses.

In essence, the challenges faced by Roma families in their interactions with children's services are deeply rooted in historical discrimination, societal biases, and systemic failures. Addressing these issues requires a comprehensive approach, including cultural competence training for professionals, addressing discriminatory practices, combating negative stereotypes, and conducting further research to understand and respond to the specific needs of the Roma community in the British context.

Poverty

The impact of inequality and socio-economic circumstances is visible, and often affects Roma parents' ability to meet expected standards of care.

The economic hardships experienced by Roma families, compounded by austerity measures, contribute to challenging circumstances that hinder parents' ability to provide adequate care for their children. Official statistics show that a growing number of children from low-income families are entering care. Research suggests that the root causes of this trend are austerity policies and the erosion of public services and preventive approaches to family safeguarding. In 2017, The Association of Directors of Children's Services concluded austerity policies and an increasingly fragmented approach to public services were taking a toll on communities and punishing the most economically fragile households.

Between 2010 and 2016, the number of children assessed by social workers as being in need rose by 5%, the number of children subject to a child protection

plan increased by 29%, and the numbers of children in care were up 10%. Recent statistics indicate continued challenges in the UK regarding children in need and those under social care. As of 2023, there were over 655,000 completed assessments for children in need, marking a 1.6% increase from 2022. Despite this increase, referrals saw a slight decrease of 1.5%, driven mainly by a fall in police referrals. However, the number of re-referrals, indicating repeated need, rose by 3.1% (Department for Education, Explore our statistics and data) .The numbers increased in the most deprived areas, where children are already more likely to be in care, and austerity cuts have been harsher.

Our research also highlighted a concerning pattern where social workers, especially when dealing with Roma children, tend to conflate poverty with neglect.

Regularly labelled by social services as 'hard to reach', or 'hard to engage', Roma families experience an excess of risk-averse intervention and surveillance. Such an approach stems from a lack of knowledge about Roma and a failure to understand or acknowledge the reasons for Roma people's often understandable evasive behaviour and mistrust towards public officials. For example, Roma parents often struggle to navigate NHS services due to language barriers, lack of health awareness and experiences of discrimination in their countries of origin. These disadvantages lead to underreporting of their children's illnesses and non-attendance at regular checkups. Unfortunately, social workers may not fully comprehend the depth of this fear and may jump to conclusions, deeming parents unfit to care for their children.

Our examination has illuminated a glaring oversight in addressing the pivotal role of poverty in the increasing numbers of children entering care. Josh MacAlister, leading the children's social care review, recognised that local councils are trapped in a perpetual cycle of crisis intervention, lacking sufficient resources for strategic planning and with an urgent need for a systemic re-evaluation. Despite the ambitious objectives outlined in the review, the authors failed to recognise the impact of poverty and destitution on children's welfare. The structural racism and historical oppression that reproduces poverty and puts so many Roma families at risk also went largely unquestioned, and the system that confuses poverty with neglect continues unchallenged. Moving forward, it is imperative that children's services not only acknowledge but also prioritise the intersectionality of poverty and ethnicity to ensure a more equitable and comprehensive approach to safeguarding the well-being of vulnerable children.

Different cultural expectations and child rearing practices

The prevailing expectations of parenting and social work standards rooted in Western norms may not adequately align with the cultural nuances present within some Roma communities. The Western model of in-person parental monitoring sometimes clashes with the realities of Roma families, where shift work and reliance on community members, not necessarily within the household, play essential roles in childcare.

The clash of cultural norms between British standards and those of Roma families underscores the assimilatory pressures historically imposed on Roma communities. The perception gap of cultural norms, as highlighted by Powell (2016), emphasises the need for a more nuanced understanding of Roma childhood processes, oriented towards familial connections and traditions, to ensure fair and culturally sensitive social work practices.

3 What obstacles do Roma families face when interacting with children's services?

Distrust and fear

While examining the interactions between Roma families and children's services, a common theme that emerged was the prevalence of distrust and fear. All aspects of our research show that this sentiment is rooted both in Roma parents' experiences in their countries of origin and their negative encounters with children's services in England.

Facing serious discrimination is part and parcel of the adverse, unpleasant encounters with state agencies which are well documented as part of Roma people's experience throughout Europe (Picker, 2010; Nacu, 2012; Greenfields et al., 2015) and should be recognised as the lived history which they bring to their lives in England. The terrible trajectory of their history in Europe includes decades of hostility and attempts at cultural annihilation involving the forced sterilisation of women, removal of children to non-Roma families and placing of children in special schools (Poole and Adamson, 2008). This historical context is the basis for the legacy of state interest in Roma lifestyles and families and accordingly, for many Roma both in the UK and internationally, an often well-grounded fear of authority.

Unhelpful and unsupportive encounters with social care professionals in England, together with sharing of information within Roma communities about negative experiences, such as removal of children as part of police anti-trafficking operations in the UK, consolidates the fear and mistrust that Roma experienced in their countries of origin. Fear is prevalent and impacts on Roma people's willingness to engage with public services and those perceived as being in positions of power, with the greatest fear around children being taken into care.

A lack of cultural competence, failure to meet professional standards, including direct discrimination, and systemic failures

In this context, professionals' understanding of the pre-migration circumstances and culturally competent social work practice can make a real difference in helping overcome the initial fear which so often characterises Roma parents' engagement with children's services.

However, our research shows that, overall, Roma families' experiences with children's services are often negative either due to lack of cultural competence, direct discrimination, other poor practice, and systemic failures within social care. This is linked to wider, entrenched negative and stigmatising societal attitudes as well as insufficient budgets, loss of universal and specialist services, social workers' conflicting demands and pressures leading to a loss of a reflective space. The power imbalance between Roma families and children's services leads to a lack of accountability which means that failure to follow professional standards and statutory guidance often goes unchallenged.

Therefore, perhaps unsurprisingly, Roma parents, as well as social workers who participated in our interviews, identified that in practice they observed a speeding up and escalation of cases involving Roma families.

In addition, Roma parents often felt that children's services did not understand their particular ways of doing things, for example, their 'open doors' culture and welcoming people in their homes, practices around food, extended families living together in small houses or early marriage. They felt that they were treated more harshly than English families because they were Roma.

Communication barriers

Problems with communication were identified as the key barriers to engagement, and the source of most misunderstandings between Roma families and social workers. Limited literacy, language barriers and different communication approaches by social workers in the UK when compared with expectations in countries of origin, as well as misunderstandings over what is required, appear to frequently lead to 'meaningless' and 'passive' exchanges.

Working through interpreters presented an additional challenge, especially as most interpreters were not necessarily from the Roma community. This meant misunderstandings and assumptions often occurred, in many cases to the detriment of Roma families. Post-pandemic increased online communication can raise more barriers in social work practice, as well as in the courts, leading to further disengagement from Roma parents.

Low legal capability and digital exclusion

Challenges also arise from low legal capability and digital exclusion, both of which are particularly evident in online court proceedings. For instance, legal professionals and social workers who participated in our survey identified lack of awareness and understanding of child protection processes as a significant challenge faced by Roma parents when interacting with children's services and courts. Similarly, our discussion groups with Roma parents show that most Roma parents don't understand the child protection process and were aware that this created a power imbalance between them and children's services. In addition, most Roma families do not have the legal capability (knowledge, confidence and skills) they need to understand when they are subject to poor practice, and how to challenge it.

The majority of lawyers we consulted believed that the shift to online courts had negatively impacted their Roma clients' ability to fully engage in court proceedings. This was mostly related to digital exclusion, lack of digital skills, and the barriers online communication can raise when parents are not able to speak in their first language. There is therefore a real danger that Roma parents, and indeed some other groups that are experiencing digital exclusion, face significant barriers in access to justice as our court systems continue to digitalise if no appropriate support or reasonable adjustments are provided when needed. Importantly, our legal research shows that Roma parents often request transfers of their care proceedings cases back to their home countries, as they are unable to navigate or trust English legal processes.

Scarcity of kinship placements and foster care within Roma families

As our literature review shows, the lack of foster carers from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities means that cultural continuity for children in alternative care is a significant issue and not well facilitated (Allen, 2018a; Allen, 2015; Cemlyn, 2009). Similarly, Roma parents who participated in our discussion groups challenged the way children's services look after Roma children in care and it was apparent that most families were not aware of kinship care. Those parents who considered putting themselves forward reported that they either did not meet the standards required or were worried that by putting themselves forward, they could end up being investigated themselves. Consequently, it is likely that most Roma children who were either temporarily or permanently removed from their birth families lost contact with the Roma language, customs, and traditions for the entire duration of their time in care. A disturbing example of this was recognised by a judge in one of the care proceedings cases analysed where young children, who were placed in foster care, spent considerable time away from their parents due to court delays and consequently had to communicate with their birth mother through an interpreter.

Similarly, most social workers who participated in our survey did not believe the cultural identity of Roma children in care was supported. Indeed, one respondent noted the urgent need for Roma families to be encouraged to foster and/or adopt to improve the experiences of looked after Roma children.

Lack of Roma-focused research

Socio-economic and legal circumstances of the Roma migrant population continue to be under-researched in the British context despite quantitative data that shows that Roma migrants face discrimination and socio-economic disparities, compounded by external factors, such as the cost-of-living crisis, Brexit, and the impact of pandemic. Lack of research hinders the creation of targeted responses and prevents professionals from understanding the needs of this particular community and their circumstances.

4 What factors enable Roma families to interact with children's services effectively?

Community based social work and collaboration

Social care practitioners highlighted building and establishing trust on an individual and wider community level either directly or through intermediaries as key to building positive engagement with Roma families.

Cultural competence and respectful curiosity

Social work practitioners also stressed the importance of receiving training about Roma history and culture and valuing anti-oppressive practice and cultural competence. In practice, for Roma parents, this usually meant openness, having a positive and encouraging approach, valuing family strengths, accepting Roma hospitality, acknowledging positive progress made and making sure that families understood expectations, concerns and the child protection process.

Early help

Roma parents valued help with accessing health services, housing and welfare support. Many Roma parents also appreciated learning from social workers about healthy diet, parenting skills and support provided for children with disabilities. A multitude of these examples, given during the discussion group sessions with Roma parents, challenges the notion that Roma are a 'hard to reach' group but concern remains around such examples being seen as exceptions, suggesting that models of good practice are not institutionalised.

Community empowerment and public legal education

In all discussion group sessions participants shared learning about child protection, helping them understand expectations and norms in the UK. Moreover, participants who had access to support from community organisations seemed more empowered, and spoke about their rights, including the right to challenge or request a change of an interpreter or a social worker. This shows the value of community support and importance of public legal education that draws upon community strengths such as oral storytelling and reliance on support within wider family networks.

Recommendations

In the next section we make recommendations to address the issues we have identified in our conclusions. There are a large number of recommendations which is indicative of the need for a holistic approach required to improve outcomes for Roma families involved with children's services in England.

Recommendations to increase understanding of the proportion of Roma families involved with children's services

Enhance data collection on Roma migrants

Government departments, Office for National Statistics and local authorities should:

- Disaggregate ethnically sensitive information in administrative data sets and ensure consistency in data collection in all government departments.

Funders, universities, and policy makers should:

- Establish a robust research strategy focused on collecting high-quality data specifically on Roma migrants as a distinct ethnic group. This research should be co-produced with the Roma community and encompass both qualitative and quantitative components to provide a holistic understanding of their experiences. This collaboration should include the provision of funding for impact-based research and sharing of administrative data.

- Implement evaluation mechanisms to assess the impact of funded research projects and use feedback to continuously improve the collaboration framework and research outcomes. This will enable a thorough assessment of the experiences and outcomes of Roma individuals within and across all public service settings.

Universities and academics should:

- Ensure Roma participation in the design, implementation, and analysis of research to foster inclusivity and accurately represent the perspectives of the Roma community.

Recommendations to address the factors which contribute to Roma families' involvement with children's services

Introduce a comprehensive Roma inclusion strategy

Central government should:

- Develop a centralised Roma Inclusion Strategy to address and alleviate the discrimination, isolation and poverty faced by the Roma community. This strategy:

✓ Should be grounded in a commitment to promoting equality, fostering social cohesion, and ensuring the full participation of Roma individuals in all aspects of society.

✓ Foster a coordinated effort to leverage resources, expertise, and diverse perspectives in tackling the complex issues faced by the Roma population through collaboration among government departments and community organisations.

✓ Allocate appropriate budget and ensure robust monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to assess and iterate the effectiveness of the strategy.

✓ Prioritise the active engagement and participation of the Roma community in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the strategy.

✓ Launch public awareness campaigns to promote understanding and acceptance of Roma culture and dispel stereotypes. These campaigns should work in tandem with the Roma Inclusion Strategy to create an environment conducive to the success of the proposed initiatives.

Incorporate Roma people as a priority target group

Government and local authorities should:

- Define Roma as a priority target group in policies aimed at promoting inclusive education, access to healthcare, and housing. It is important that policy makers recognise the unique challenges faced by the Roma community, understanding that they are here to stay and are disproportionately affected by poverty and inequality.

- Collaborate with Roma advocacy groups and community organisations to ensure that policies are developed in consultation with the Roma community.

Recommendations to address the obstacles that Roma families face when interacting with children's services

Embed a culturally competent approach for Roma families in children's services

Children's services should:

- Introduce mandatory cultural competence training for professionals working in children's services both in their initial training within universities and as continued professional development. Ensure that such professionals are equipped with the knowledge and skills needed to engage effectively with Roma families. Training should include an understanding of cultural nuances, traditions, child rearing practices and communication styles to enhance service delivery.

- Integrate trauma-informed care principles into children's services when working with Roma families. Recognise the potential impact of historical trauma and discrimination on individuals and families.

- Promote the adoption of biographical approaches during family assessments. Recognise that individual and family histories play a significant role in shaping perspectives, behaviours, and challenges.

- Recognise and address language barriers which act as a significant barrier to effective working with Roma families. Ensure that children's services have access to interpreters who speak Romanes and who can facilitate clear and effective communication.

- Implement regular audits of cultural sensitivity within children' services. Ensure that policies, procedures, and practices are regularly reviewed to align with evolving cultural competence standards.

- Improve interaction between families and children's services outside the child protection context to overcome fear and mistrust associated with children's services in general by providing meaningful early intervention support.

- Foster cooperation with Roma NGOs to expand the range of models and initiatives available to restore and strengthen Roma families' trust in child protection agencies and professionals.

- Review casework involving Roma families in local authorities with a high number of resident Roma with the help of Roma advocates to recognise weaknesses in approach and develop a strategy to address these weaknesses/shortcomings and system inequalities.

- Create a good practice guide for social workers as a reference when working with Roma families to promote institutionalisation of good practice models.

Recommendations to facilitate positive outcomes for Roma families when interacting with children's services

Improve engagement with Roma families through education and training

Universities and training providers should:

- Make learning about Roma culture and tradition a mandatory element of all social work education qualification and training.

- Invest in training Roma to become researchers and get involved in policy work and social work practice.

- Provide funding and bursaries for Roma community members wanting to qualify as social workers.

Ensure cultural continuity and family connections for Roma children

Children's services should:

- Prioritise efforts to place Roma children with their next of kin whenever possible.

- Conduct thorough and culturally sensitive assessments to identify suitable family members within the extended network who can provide a nurturing and familiar environment.

- Address assumptions about Roma families that may result in failed viability assessments for kinship care. Review minimum standards for viability assessments and raise awareness about socio-economic disadvantages within Roma communities, most importantly housing issues.

- Allocate resources to actively recruit, train, and support Roma foster parents.

- Recognise the value of placing Roma children in culturally competent foster homes, where they can maintain a strong connection to their identity, language, and traditions. Foster parents who are not from a Roma background should be equipped with the necessary cultural understanding to provide a supportive and enriching environment.

- Recognise the paramount importance of preserving the cultural environment for Roma children within adoption services. Develop and enforce policies that prioritise maintaining a connection to their cultural heritage, traditions, and community. Work collaboratively with Roma communities to identify and honour cultural considerations throughout the adoption process.

- Implement mandatory cultural competence training for prospective adoptive families, emphasising the unique cultural needs of Roma children. Ensure that families are well-prepared to provide an environment that respects and supports the child's cultural identity.

- Foster partnerships with Roma community leaders and organisations to actively engage them in the adoption process. Seek their input and guidance to ensure that cultural considerations are embedded in every stage of adoption services. Collaborate on initiatives that support both the child and the adoptive family.

- Provide continuous cultural awareness programmes for adoption professionals.

Rollout community empowerment work and public legal education

Government, local authorities and funders should:

- Invest in public legal education work for Roma NGOs and Roma activists to help ensure that Roma families understand safeguarding risks, child protection processes, their rights, how to challenge poor practice and where to get legal advice.

Improve legal help to ensure legal professionals are able to support Roma families appropriately

Roma NGOs (with funding) should:

- Work with the Bar Council, Law Society (Children's Law Subcommittee) and Law Commission to provide training for legal professionals, including the judiciary, regarding Roma parents' barriers in participating in court processes.

Appendices

1 Survey questions for social workers

Section One - Background Information

1. Do you have experience of working with Roma families?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

2. What is your current job title?

_____

3. Which countries have the Roma families you've worked with come from? Please select at least 1 answer.

☐ Slovakia   ☐ Romania

☐ Czech Republic

☐ Poland   ☐ Bulgaria

☐ Hungary   ☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

_____

4. Approximately how many Roma families have you worked with in a professional capacity?

☐ 0-3   ☐ 4 / 13   ☐ 4-6

☐ 7-9   ☐ 10+

5. What has your role entailed when working with Roma families? Please describe the activities/ interventions, etc. you have undertaken.

_____

_____

_____

6. What has your role entailed when working with Roma families? Please describe the activities/ interventions, etc. you have undertaken. Tick all applicable.

☐ Physical abuse

☐ Sexual abuse

☐ Emotional abuse,

☐ Neglect

☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

_____

7. In your experience what are the most common child protection issues raised within Roma families presenting to children's services?

_____

_____

_____

8. In your experience what are the main challenges when working with Roma families?

_____

_____

9. Do you think that the Roma families you have worked with understand the child protection process well and what is expected of them?

Please explain your answer.

_____

_____

_____

☐ Yes   ☐ No

Section B - Partnership Working

10. Do you have any contact with Roma NGOs in your work with Roma families?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

If yes, please expand.

_____

11. When working with Roma families and interpreters are these mostly non-Roma speaking interpreters? Select one answer.

☐ Yes   ☐ No   ☐ Not sure

12. How would you describe your experience of working with interpreters for Roma families? (On a scale of 1- being 'very dissatisfied' to 7 being 'very satisfied')

_____

13. In your experience how would you describe the relationship between Roma families and social workers to be?

☐ Co-operative   ☐ Conflictual

☐ Neither co-operative or conflictual

☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

_____

14. Do you think the relationships between social workers and Roma families could be improved?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

Please expand on your answer.

_____

15. Do you think the experience of Roma families with children's services needs to be improved?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

Please expand on your answer.

_____

Section C - Learning and Development

16. Have you received any training regarding Roma culture?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Please expand on your answer.

_____

_____

_____

17. What support, if any, do you think would be helpful for you when working with Roma families?

_____

_____

_____

18. How effectively do you think the cultural identity of Roma in care/looked after children is supported? (On a scale of 1 being 'not supported at all' to 7 being 'very supported'. Select one answer.)

_____

19. Can you provide an example of positive engagement with Roma families in children services and identify the key success factors?

_____

_____

_____

20. Is there anything else you would like to mention in relation to Roma families and children's services?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

2 Survey questions for lawyers

Section One - Background Information

1. Do you have experience of working with Roma families?

   ☐ Yes ☐ No

2. What is your current job title?

   _____

3. Which countries have the Roma families you've worked with come from? Please select at least 1 answer(s).

   ☐ Slovakia ☐ Romania

   ☐ Czech Republic

   ☐ Poland ☐ Bulgaria

   ☐ Hungary ☐ Other

   If you selected Other, please specify:

   _____

Section B - Legal Services

6. Do you think the relationships between legal professionals and Roma families could be improved?

   ☐ Yes ☐ No

   If yes, how?

   _____

   _____

7. How easy is it for you to instruct experts, e.g., for Parenting Assessments, Independent Social Workers etc. who are Roma or who have experience of working with Roma families? (On a scale of 1 being 'easy' to 7 being 'difficult)

   Any comments?

   _____

   _____

   _____

4. Approximately how many Roma families have you worked with in a professional capacity?

   ☐ 0-3 ☐ 4 / 13 ☐ 4-6

   ☐ 7-9 ☐ 10+

5. How are you first contacted by your Roma clients? Tick all that are applicable.

   ☐ Self-referral

   ☐ Referred by a family member

   ☐ Referred by an NGO

   ☐ Through CAFCASS (Guardian)

   ☐ Other

   If you selected Other, please specify:

   _____

8. Have the Roma clients you represent also needed legal representation for other matters?

   ☐ Challenging Deportation/ Admin Removal

   ☐ Trafficking and Modern Slavery (i.e., with negative reasonable/ conclusive grounds decisions)

   ☐ Asylum and Humanitarian Protection

   ☐ Criminal Matters

   ☐ Housing

   ☐ Welfare Benefits

   ☐ 6 / 13

   ☐ EEA Settled Status

   ☐ Other

   If you selected Other, please specify:

   _____

9. Have the Roma clients you represent also needed legal representation for other matters?

_____

10. Have they been able to access legal support for this?

_____

11. In your experience what are the most common child protection issues raised within Roma families presenting to children's services?

☐ Physical abuse

☐ Sexual Abuse

☐ Emotional Abuse

☐ Neglect

☐ Other

☐ Tick all applicable

☐ Other

If you selected Other, please specify:

_____

12. In your experience what are the main challenges when working with Roma families?

_____

13. How much do you think that the Roma families you have worked with understand the child protection process well and what is expected of them? (On a scale from 1 being 'they don't understand at all' to 7 being 'they understand well')

_____

Any comments?

_____

_____

14 Do you think that a shift to remote court hearings impacts the ability for Roma families to engage in proceedings?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

Any comments?

_____

Section C - Partnership Working

15. Do you have any contact with Roma NGOs in your work with Roma families?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

If yes, any comments?

_____

16. When working with Roma families and interpreters are these mostly non-Roma speaking interpreters? (eg, using a Slovak speaker rather than a Romanes speaker?)

☐ Yes   ☐ No

Any comments?

_____

17. How would you describe your experience of working with interpreters for Roma families? (On a scale of 1 being 'very dissatisfied' to 7 being 'very satisfied')

_____

Any comments?

_____

_____

_____

_____

18. In your experience how would you describe the relationship between Roma families and social workers to be?

☐ Co-operative   ☐ Conflictual

☐ Neither co-operative or conflictual

☐ Other

_____

If you selected Other, please specify:

_____

_____

19. Do you think the experience of Roma families with children's services needs to be improved?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

Any comments?

_____

20. When representing Roma families, how aware of Roma culture and heritage are the CAFCASS Guardians? (On a scale of 1 being 'they are not aware at all' to 7 being 'they are very aware')

Any comments?

_____

Section D - Learning and Development

20. Have you received any training regarding Roma culture?

☐ Yes   ☐ No

Please explain your answer.

_____

21. What support, if any, do you think would be helpful for you when working with Roma families?

_____

22. How effectively do you think the cultural identity of Roma in care/looked after children is supported? (On a scale from 1 being 'not supported at all' to 7 being 'very supported')

_____

Any comments?

_____

_____

23. Can you provide an example of positive engagement between Roma families and children services and identify the key success factors?

_____

_____

_____

_____

24. Is there anything else you would like to mention in relation to Roma families and children's services?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

3 Interview questions for legal professionals

1. To begin with can you tell me about your role and how it relates to working with Roma families in the legal system?

   _____

   _____

   Prompts: length of time, activities, numbers

   _____

   _____

2. How would you describe the relationship between Roma families in the social care and legal system?

   _____

   _____

   Prompts: co-operative, conflictual – explore what informs this

3. From your perspective do you think that Roma children are over-represented in child welfare services in England? – if yes explore reasons why and evidence

   _____

   _____

4. In your work with Roma families presenting to children's services have you found any patterns in:

   a. child protection issues raised

   b. demographics of parent(s)

5. In your experience how are Roma families prepared and kept updated about their cases?

   _____

   _____

   Prompts: any differences to other communities, sharing of information, cultural understanding

6. Have you found any differences in your work within and between different Roma communities?

   _____

   _____

7. In your opinion what do you feel are the main challenges facing Roma families in their interactions with children's services and the legal system?

   _____

   _____

   Prompts: mistrust, language, cultural prejudices, lack of resources e.g. Roma speaking interpreters, use of experts. digital exclusion.

8. What do you think are the challenges facing legal professionals when working with Roma families?

   _____

   _____

   Prompts: mistrust, language, cultural prejudices, lack of resources, lack of knowledge of guardians etc.

9. In your experience have you found many Roma parents request to transfer their cases to their country of origin? Explore if yes (reasons, outcomes etc.)

   _____

   _____

10. In what ways, if at all, do you think the relationship between Roma families, children's services and the legal system might be improved?

_____

_____

11. Is there anything else you would like to mention in relation to your experience of working with Roma families in children's services, including:

   a. examples of both good and poor practice

   b. recommendations for practice?

   _____

   _____

   _____

4 Interview questions for social care professionals

1. To begin with, can you tell me about your role and your experience in working with Roma families in children's services?

   _____

   _____

   _____

   Prompts: length of time, activities, numbers

2. How would you describe the relationship between Roma families in the social care and legal system?

   _____

   _____

   _____

   Prompts: co-operative, conflictual – explore what informs this

3. From your perspective do you think that Roma children are over-represented in children services in England? – if yes explore reasons why and evidence

   _____

   _____

   _____

4. In your work with Roma families presenting to children's services have you found any patterns in:

   a. child protection issues raised

   b. demographics of parent(s)

   c. Any other patterns?

   _____

   _____

   _____

5. In your experience how are Roma families prepared and kept updated about their case?

   _____

   _____

   _____

   Prompts: any differences to other communities, sharing of information, cultural understanding, challenges

6. Have you found any differences in your work within and between different Roma communities?

7. In your opinion what do you feel are the main challenges facing Roma families in their interactions with children's services?

_____

_____

_____

Prompts: mistrust, language, cultural prejudices, lack of resources e.g. Roma speaking interpreters, experts etc.

8. What do you think are the challenges facing social workers [care practitioners] when working with Roma families?

_____

_____

_____

Prompts: mistrust, language, cultural prejudices, lack of resources etc.

9. In your experience have you found many Roma parents request to transfer their cases to their country of origin? Explore if yes (reasons, outcomes etc.)

_____

_____

_____

10. In what ways, if at all, do you think the relationship between Roma families and children's services might be improved?

_____

_____

_____

11. Is there anything else you would like to mention in relation to your experience of working with Roma families in children's services, including:

a. examples of both good and poor practice

b. recommendations for practice?

_____

_____

_____

5 Discussion group questions

Theme 1 - Exploring experiences of Roma families with social workers and children's services

1. How does the involvement with social workers make you feel?

_____

_____

2. How did you find dealing with social workers?

_____

_____

3. Did you feel misunderstood for being from a different culture?

_____

_____

4. Some Roma families who are going through care proceedings, asked for their cases to be transferred back to their country of origin- what do you think might be their reasons?

_____

_____

5. Who in this process was helpful, could you explain why? (solicitor, children's guardian, parenting support worker, judge, interpreter, Roma advocate, etc.)

_____

_____

- Did the embassy from your country of origin ever help/get involved? (additional question)

_____

_____

Theme 2 - People's challenges and barriers when interacting with children's services (what makes this interaction difficult and why)

6. If you or somebody you know went through this process, what was the hardest thing about it?

_____

_____

- Do you have any knowledge about kinship care/foster care?

_____

_____

Theme 3 - How could children's services work better with Roma families?

7. If you could change anything about the way social workers interact with Roma families- what would you change?

_____

_____

_____

_____

8. How can the relationship between you, your community and social workers be improved?

_____

_____

_____

_____

9. What would make it easier for Roma families to deal with social workers?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Glossary

This glossary explains what we mean by some of the terms we use in this report.

A2 countries

Bulgaria and Romania joined the EU in 2007, giving nationals of those countries the right to come to the UK (or other EU countries). Greater numbers of people from Bulgaria and Romania began to arrive in the UK in later years, after restrictions on their rights to live and work in the UK were removed after a transition period.

A8 countries

Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia joined the EU in 2004, giving nationals of those countries the right to come to the UK (and other EU countries).

Alternative care

A term used to describe a range of arrangements that can be made for children who cannot live with their birth parents, for example, kinship care, foster care or adoption.

Aversive racism

The American Psychological Association defines 'aversive racism' as a form of racial prejudice felt by individuals who outwardly endorse egalitarian or non-racist attitudes and values but nonetheless experience negative emotions in the presence of members of certain racial groups.

Care plan

A detailed plan setting out the arrangements for a looked after child.

Child protection plan

A plan that is made when a child is placed on a local authority's child protection register due to the child being at risk of significant harm. The plan must include how the social worker will check the child's welfare, what changes the parents need to reduce the risk to the child and what support they will be given to do this

Child protection services

Services that focus on protecting children from abuse, neglect or any form of harm. They will instigate interventions, safeguarding, legal action and support for families to ensure a child's safety.

Closed-ended survey questions

Questions that can only be answered by selecting from a limited list of options, for example, multiple choice questions.

Cultural competence

The National Association of Social Workers defines this as the process by which individuals and systems respond respectfully and effectively to people of all cultures, languages, classes, races, ethnic backgrounds, religions, spiritual traditions, immigration status, and other diversity factors in a manner that recognises, affirms, and values the worth of individuals, families, and communities.

Descriptive analysis

A summary or description of the data.

English / Welsh Romany (Gypsies) or Welsh Kale

Sometimes referred to as 'Romanichal', they have a long history of living and travelling in the UK. It is suggested that they originated in India, although their ancestry had been disputed in the literature (see Okley, 1997). Many speak one of seven distinct languages, primarily Anglo-Romanes and Romani, as well as English. (Ellie Mulcahy, Sam Baars, Kate Bowen-Viner and Loic Menzies; The underrepresentation of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller pupils in higher education, LKMco, 2017.)

EU Anti-Racist Action Plan

The EU Commission's plan to 'step up action against racism and achieve a Union of Equality'

EU Roma Strategic Framework

A ten year plan, ending in 2030 to support Roma in the EU.

Guardians

Guardians are qualified social workers, trained and experienced in working with children and families. They are appointed by the court to represent the rights and interests of the child and to provide the court with independent advice about the child's best interests.

Gypsy, Roma, Traveller (GRT)

The term Gypsy, Roma, Traveller (GRT) encompasses many communities, including Romany Gypsies (English Gypsies, Scottish Gypsy Travellers, Welsh Gypsies, and Romany people more widely), Irish Travellers, New Travellers, Boaters, Showmen and Roma.

Irish Travellers

Also called 'Pavee' and 'Minceir', they often move between the UK and Ireland and are of Celtic descent. They speak 'Cant' or 'Gammon' also known as 'Shelta'.

Lacking litigation capacity

The Mental Capacity Act 2005 says that a person may lack mental capacity if they cannot:

- understand information relevant to the decision or
- retain that information or
- use or weigh that information as part of the process of making the decision or
- communicate the decision (by any means)

and, their inability to do so is because of an impairment or disturbance in the functioning of the person's mind or brain.

When assessing Roma, every effort should be made to use correct interpreters to avoid incorrect assessment outcomes.

Legal capability

The knowledge, attitudes and skills a person needs to deal with a law related issue.

Lexis+

A database of legislation and case law.

'Looked after' child

Under the Children Act 1989, a child is looked-after by a local authority if he or she:

- is provided with accommodation, for a continuous period of more than 24 hours [Children Act 1989, Section 20 and 21]
- is subject to a care order [Children Act 1989, Part IV]
- is subject to a placement order.

National case review repository

When a child dies, or is seriously harmed, because of abuse or neglect, a case review is conducted to identify ways that local professionals and organisations can better work together to safeguard children. The National case review repository is the most comprehensive collection of case reviews in the UK.

National referral mechanism

A framework for identifying and referring potential victims of modern slavery and ensuring they receive the appropriate support.

NVivo

A software programme used to analyse large amounts of text.

Open-ended survey questions

Questions that do not give people a limited number of options but allow them to answer more fully and in their own words.

Pre-settled status

Allows people from the EU, European Economic Area and Switzerland to live, work and study in the UK for five years.

Public legal education

Law for Life defines public legal education as 'a wide range of activities aimed at increasing people's knowledge, skills and confidence to empower them to deal with their law-related problems.'

Roma

Historically, Roma people originate from Northern India. They settled in Europe before migrating to the UK more recently. Roma people speak diverse languages as well as having differing cultural and historic backgrounds. Although descended from the same ancestry as British Romany Gypsies, they are a different group to Romany

(Gypsies) and Travellers despite being conflated in the research literature, in policy and in practice. 'Roma' is also used (not uncontroversially) as an umbrella term within the EU to denote a range of communities including Roma, Travellers and Gypsies. Roma experience particular barriers and inclusion needs, which are informed by their histories and experiences in Eastern Europe. This group often rejects the term 'Gypsy', preferring 'Roma'.

Roma champions

Roma people who support and promote their communities and partner with outside agencies.

Romanes

The language of Roma people. Romanes has many dialects used by different Roma groups. More information about Romanes language can be found at the Romani Linguistics Website.

Scottish Gypsy Travellers

This Gypsy subgroup consists of further subgroups and was only recently recognised as a separate ethnic group. They may also refer to themselves as 'Nachins' and 'Nawkins'

Semi-structured interviews

Interviews which have a pre-defined set of themes around which to structure the discussion with the interviewee.

Settled status

The right for people from the EU, European Economic Area and Switzerland to live in the UK permanently.

Third sector

A term used to describe organisations that are neither private nor public sector.

Voluntary returns

When the UK Home Office arranges and pays for migrants who do not have status to return to their country of origin.

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