

Children's Social Care Inquiry Education Committee

Written evidence by Roma Support Group, supported by Law for Life

PART A

1. Introduction

[Roma Support Group](#) (RSG) is the first Roma community-led charity organisation in Great Britain, aiming to empower the Roma community to challenge discrimination, exercise their rights, integrate into UK society, and fulfil their potential. Since 1998, we have supported 66,000 Roma people with welfare, housing, debt and employability issues. Furthermore, we have trained or supported over 7,400 professionals, benefitting over 86,000 Roma people. This work includes over 130 Social Services requests to directly assist and support Roma families involved in child protection cases, including court proceedings.

[Law for Life: the Foundation for Public Legal Education](#) is an education and information charity aiming to increase access to justice by providing everyone with an awareness of their legal rights together with the confidence and skills to assert them. In partnership with Roma NGOs, Law for Life created [free resources for Roma parents](#), in response to concerns about the increase in Roma families subject to child protection investigations and the number of Roma children being taken into care by local authorities in England.

This written evidence draws on some of the findings from a [collaborative mixed methods study](#), conducted by Law for Life, [Anglia Ruskin University](#), and [Lancaster University](#) (Centre for Child and Family Justice Research), which examined the experiences of Roma families within child welfare services in England.¹ Combining analysis of legal cases linked to care proceedings, in-depth interviews with lawyers and social workers, and focus groups with Roma people with lived experience of the child welfare system, the research generated evidence to underpin policy recommendations aimed at promoting more equitable and culturally competent practice in the child welfare system.

This submission reflects our organisational experience and insights from our work and relates to the Central and Eastern European Roma communities settled in England from 1989 onwards.

¹ Boyce, M., et al (2023). *Come to us in a peaceful way: Improving experiences of Roma families with Children's Services in England, Research report*. [Unpublished manuscript]. Lancaster University, Anglia Ruskin University, Law for Life

2. General Context

Roma in the UK

Roma started to migrate to the UK as of 1989 from Central and Eastern European countries. The 2021 Census confirms 103,200 Roma are living in England and Wales today. Previous research confirms around 200,000 Roma living in the UK.²

Roma Families in Children’s Social Care context

Research suggests that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller (GRT) families are subjected to a disproportionate amount of child protection reporting and intervention.³

DfE data in 2023 shows a disproportionate increase in the number of Gypsy/Roma children in the care system. Between 2019 and 2023, the total number of looked-after children increased by 7.29%, while for the Gypsy and Roma, it increased by 22.44%.⁴ In Europe, research in 2022 revealed that “as many as four in five children in the care institutions of some countries are of Roma origin.”⁵ In Bulgaria, while the Roma comprise less than 10% of the population, they account for more than 60% of the children’s home population.⁶ In Slovakia, that number rises to 80%.⁷

The views of Roma and those who support them

Experiences of Roma families with Children’s Services in England are largely negative, including reports of direct or indirect discrimination, barriers in communication, lack of information on how the child protection system works and lack of adequate support to understand and make the changes required by Children’s Services, making them feel vulnerable and frightened.⁸

Civil society groups have reported gaps in knowledge and skills among Children’s Services regarding Roma families.⁹ Additionally, they have found that Children’s Services do not address various barriers and multiple disadvantages that Roma families face. Effective

² Brown, P., Scullion, L., & Phillip, M. (2013) *Migrant Roma in the United Kingdom. Population size and experiences of local authorities and partners*, University of Salford.

³ Allen, D. and Hamnett, V. (2022). Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children in child welfare services in England. *The British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 52(7), 3904–3922.

⁴ Department for Education. (n.d.-a). *Children looked after in England including adoptions*. GOV.UK.

⁵ Kostka, J. (2022, January 27). *Social Care: How Gypsy, roma and Traveller children face discrimination across Europe and the UK*. The Conversation.

<https://theconversation.com/social-care-how-gypsy-roma-and-traveller-children-face-discrimination-across-europe-and-the-uk-170312>

⁶ Rorke, B. (2021, January). *Blighted Lives: Romani Children In State Care*. ERRC.

http://www.errc.org/uploads/upload_en/file/5284_file1_blighted-lives-romani-children-in-state-care.pdf

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Roma Support Group’s casework.

⁹ Roma Rights Forum, run by the Roma Support Group.

communication with Roma families is also lacking. Children's Services often do not engage with bi-lingual Roma advocates/interpreters to ensure meaningful communication, rather using interpreters who speak second or third languages of Roma families.

What needs to be done to fully understand the experiences of Roma?

Systematic consultation with Roma families and service providers would enhance understanding of Roma's experiences and the difficulties services face when working with them.

Public services in the UK, such as the DfE, face a challenge in data collection and monitoring concerning GRT people. Generally, the data is not disaggregated, resulting in a grouping of Roma and Gypsy ethnicities together while considering Irish Travellers as a separate category.¹⁰ This practice complicates the accurate representation of each distinct community within these larger classifications, impacting the precision of data analysis and the tailoring of services to meet their specific needs. The Roma category should be included in all DfE ethnic monitoring.

3. Children's Services engagement with Roma and factors influencing these experiences

The level, quality and efficiency of Children's Services engagement with Roma are influenced by the following factors:

3A. General experience of marginalisation and fear of discrimination

Equality National Survey revealed that 47% GRT people reported experiencing racial assaults, while 37% had encountered physical attacks.¹¹ A survey conducted by Pew Research Centre indicated that 23% of the UK general public harbour negative perceptions towards Roma people.¹²

Facing discrimination by state agencies has been a common experience for Roma people throughout Europe¹³. This includes forced sterilisation of women¹⁴ or forced removal of

¹⁰ Department for Education. (n.d.-a). *Children looked after in England including adoptions*. GOV.UK.

¹¹ Finney, N., Nazroo, J. Y., Bécares, L., Kapadia, D., & Shlomo, N. (2023). *Racism and ethnic inequality in a time of crisis: Findings from the evidence for Equality National Survey*. Policy Press.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Nagy, V. (2018). The Janus face of precarity – Securitisation of Roma mobility in the UK. *Local Economy: The Journal of the Local Economy Policy Unit*, 33(2), 127–146. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0269094218764117>

¹⁴ Albert, G., & Szilvasi, M. (2017). Intersectional Discrimination of Romani Women Forcibly Sterilized in the Former Czechoslovakia and Czech Republic. *Health Hum Rights*, 19(2), 23–34.

children and placement of children in special schools.¹⁵ As a result, many Roma in the UK have a well-grounded fear of authority, which partially informs their behaviour when engaging with public authorities.

3B. Lack of culturally appropriate practice

The NSPCC's 2022 serious case review findings show that social work professionals may require additional support and training to work with families who have different cultural or religious backgrounds.¹⁶

During the [Roma Parallel Lives Project](#) (2017 to 2020), Roma Support Group provided cultural training to over 700 public service professionals, including those working in Children's Services. They reported a low or limited level of knowledge about Roma culture and history, which impacts their ability to deliver culturally competent engagement with Roma families.

3C. Communication

2021 Census data on Roma confirms low English language proficiency for 27.2% of Romanian Roma, 29.5% of Portuguese Roma and 32.9% of Slovak Roma.¹⁷ Across Europe, 10% of Roma are completely illiterate¹⁸ and between 40%-60% of adult Roma in the EU are functionally illiterate.¹⁹

Roma people generally primarily speak Romanes, their distinct native language. There is a lack of provision in Romanes by interpreting service providers in England. Furthermore, non-Roma interpreters of languages from countries of origin may hold discriminatory views when interpreting for Roma, influencing professionals' understanding of the situation, often leading to inaccurate or discriminatory assessments and practice.

4. Factors contributing to Children's Services interventions in Roma families

According to RSG's experience of working with Roma families in a social care context and feedback from professionals attending RSG training, the majority of Roma families are

¹⁵ European Commission. (2023, April 19). *The European Commission decides to refer SLOVAKIA to the Court of Justice of the European Union for not sufficiently addressing discrimination against Roma children at school.* https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_23_2249

¹⁶ Clarke, A. (2022, April 1). *Serious Case Review Overview Report: Anna.* NSPCC. https://www.safeguardingpartnership.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/SCR-Anna-Overview-Report_010422.pdf

¹⁷ Office for National Statistics. (2023, October 30). *Roma populations, England and Wales: Census 2021.* <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/romapopulationsenglandandwales/census2021#main-language>

¹⁸ Selander, M., & Walter, E. (2020). Lack of Educational Opportunities for the Roma People in Eastern Europe. *Ballard Brief*, 2020(3).

¹⁹ Azemovska, F. B. (2020, August 31). *Basic literacy of Roma - Challenges of Adult Education.* European Commission. <https://epale.ec.europa.eu/en/blog/basic-literacy-roma-challenges-adult-education>

investigated under the category of neglect which is closely connected to their socio-economic disadvantages in areas of housing, employment, education and health inequalities.

This experience and feedback resonates with Ethnicity and Children's Social Care Independent Review, which identified neglect as a prominent factor in referrals of Gypsy/Roma children, focusing on the following issues:

4A. Housing

According to the 2021 census in England and Wales, 26.5% of the Roma population live in overcrowded conditions.²⁰ This is much higher than the 8.4% of the overall population in England and Wales.²¹ Due to their improved living conditions in comparison to their countries of origin, many Roma families struggle to understand safeguarding concerns related to their current living conditions.

4B. Employment

According to the 2021 Census only 54% of Roma people were employed compared to 59.6% employed amongst the overall population in England and Wales.²² 28.5% held elementary occupations (such as cleaners, bar staff, seasonal helpers) in comparison to the general average of 10.5%.²³

4C. Education

In 2014 the EU Fundamental Rights Agency (FRA) reported that 20% of Roma aged 16 years olds or above cannot read and write compared to less than 1% of the EU population.²⁴ A similar FRA study in 2022 identified that only 27% of Roma in ten EU countries completed at least mandatory schooling by the age of 18.²⁵ According to the 2021 Census 30.9% of Roma people had no qualifications and only 26% completed a higher education qualification.²⁶ Lower levels of education make it more difficult for Roma families to understand the English and Welsh child protection system and have an awareness of their legal rights and responsibilities in Britain.

4D. Health

²⁰ Office for National Statistics. (2023, October 30). *Roma populations, England and Wales: Census 2021*. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/romapopulationsenglandandwales/census2021#main-language>

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2016). *Education: the situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States: Roma survey – Data in focus*. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2014-roma-survey-dif-education-1_en.pdf

²⁵ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2022, October 25). *Roma in 10 European countries - Main results*. <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2022/roma-survey-findings>

²⁶ Office for National Statistics. (2023, October 30). *Roma populations, England and Wales: Census 2021*.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/articles/romapopulationsenglandandwales/census2021#main-language>

Roma face multiple challenges in understanding health problems affecting their families and accessing information and health services.²⁷ There is a gap in support for Roma families to access and navigate health services, which directly impacts their health. This makes it difficult for most Roma families that Roma Support Group work with, to access health services and improve their health without additional support.

PART B

1. Is the current provision of children's social care sufficient to meet demand?

Current provision is not sufficient to meet demand. There is an increased demand for information, assistance and support. To meet this demand Children's Services should:

- Make accessible resources, including training for child protection professionals, on Roma culture, history and culturally competent engagement with Roma.
- Work closely with Roma advocates and/or Roma charities to engage and support Roma families in the context of child protection.
- Ensure that Roma are represented within children's social care workforce.
- Ensure that engagement with Roma families is culturally competent and well-informed.

1.1. What factors are causing the increase in demand for children's social care?

According to FRA more than 90% of Roma children are at risk of poverty.²⁸ The London School of Economics confirmed that in England and Wales, nearly a quarter of GRT children under the age of 19 live in deprivation, while only 2% of all other children face the same level of deprivation.²⁹ According to a 2022 study, child poverty has emerged as a key risk factor for children entering care, confirming that the rise of children in care was greater in poorer areas.³⁰ The same study confirmed that a 1% increase in child poverty was linked with an additional five children entering state care per 100,000 children.³¹

²⁷ Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. (2022, November 3). *Improving Roma health: A guide for health and care professionals*. GOV.UK.

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/improving-roma-health-a-guide-for-health-and-care-professionals>

²⁸ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2016). *Education: the situation of Roma in 11 EU Member States: Roma survey – Data in focus*. European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights.

https://fra.europa.eu/sites/default/files/fra_uploads/fra-2014-roma-survey-dif-education-1_en.pdf

²⁹ Burchardt, T., Obolenskaya, P., Vizard, P., & Battaglini, M. (2018, February). *Experience of multiple disadvantage among Roma, Gypsy and Traveller children in England and Wales*. London School of Economics. <https://sticerd.lse.ac.uk/dps/case/cp/casepaper208.pdf>

³⁰ Bennett, D. L., Schlüter, D. K., Melis, G., Bywaters, P., Alexiou, A., Barr, B., Wickham, S., & Taylor-Robinson, D. (2022). Child poverty and children entering care in England, 2015–20: A longitudinal ecological study at the local area level. *The Lancet Public Health*, 7(6). [https://doi.org/10.1016/s2468-2667\(22\)00065-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2468-2667(22)00065-2)

³¹ Bennett, D. L., Schlüter, D. K., Melis, G., Bywaters, P., Alexiou, A., Barr, B., Wickham, S., & Taylor-Robinson, D. (2022). Child poverty and children entering care in England, 2015–20: A longitudinal ecological study at the local area level. *The Lancet Public Health*, 7(6). [https://doi.org/10.1016/s2468-2667\(22\)00065-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/s2468-2667(22)00065-2)

There is very little institutional knowledge about Roma families and their unique challenges which, in many cases, impacts on the way professionals engage with Roma families to prevent family breakdown. In addition, there are no systemic strategies to improve this gap in knowledge. From RSG's experience, there is no ongoing CPD training or bank of resources about Roma, and social workers do not involve community advocates in their engagement with Roma families. There is a lack of investment in recruitment of social workers from Roma background.

The number of Roma in the UK increased following the A8 (2004) and A2 (2007) EU accessions, and the 2021 Census confirms that 103,200 Roma people live in England and Wales.³² Despite the increased numbers, Children's Services failed to address the gap in knowledge in relation to Roma.

1.2. What are the recent trends and causes of out-of-area placements?

A [pilot study](#) looking into experiences of Roma families with Children's Services shows that Roma families lack information about kinship care and foster care.³³ As a result, very few Roma adults involved in this study considered kinship care, and none considered fostering. Some Roma parents who expressed interest in kinship care reported that they failed viability assessments or ended up having Children's Services investigate their own families.

DfE data shows that a staggering 52% of Gypsy/Roma children are recorded as being placed out-of-area.³⁴ This increases the likelihood of Roma children and young people losing contact with their network of support and their Roma heritage and culture. Children's Services need to acknowledge the impact of loss of culture on the emotional wellbeing of Roma children in foster care and look across other ethnic groups for examples of good practice.

Over recent years RSG has observed increased calls from foster parents, social workers and other professionals in contact with looked after Roma children, as well as Roma care leavers themselves, asking for support to re-connect them with their Roma heritage.

2. The reasons behind the rising cost of children's social care for local authorities, and ways to mitigate it.

Limited availability of support services and lack of culturally competent early interventions are leading to increased numbers of Roma children being placed in care.

³² Office for National Statistics, [Roma Populations England and Wales: 2021 Census](#), 2023.

³³ Law For Life. (2023, January). *Improving experiences of Roma families with Children's Services – New Research Project*. Law For Life Advicenow. <https://www.advicenow.org.uk/lawforlife/improving-experiences-roma-families-children%E2%80%99s-services-%E2%80%93-new-research-project>

³⁴ Ahmed, N., James, D., Tayabali, A., & Watson, M. (2022, May). *Ethnicity and children's social care*. GOV.UK. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/628666598fa8f556165a1e4b/Ethnicity_and_childrens_social_care.pdf

Research indicates that this lack of early intervention can contribute to higher costs in children's social care systems.³⁵ Early interventions should be delivered by statutory and non-statutory agencies that are experienced and trained in working with Roma, to address disadvantages and barriers they face. This would enable parents to understand UK requirements, improve their parenting skills and their socio-economic situation, potentially preventing the need for child protection interventions, court proceedings or placements in care.

Factors mentioned at Part B point 1.1 apply here as well.

3. What measures can be undertaken to improve early intervention

Based on Roma Support Group's experience of working alongside both Roma families and Children's Services, the following measures can improve early intervention:

- As part of continuing professional development, social workers should access cultural competency training to gain a better understanding of Roma culture and the disadvantages Roma face, such as those due to their immigration status post-Brexit.
- Development of easily accessible resources for professionals on how to work and engage with Roma families.
- Providing training for Roma advocates, supporting their involvement in social care service delivery.
- Routine consultation and work with Roma Advocates and civil society groups experienced in working with Roma families in a child protection context.
- Improving Roma families' understanding of the legal framework of child protection, their rights and responsibilities.
- Improving Roma families' understanding of the different roles of services and professionals involved in child protection cases.
- Development of resources to support Roma cared-for children with their cultural identity and language.

4. How combinations of kinship care, residential education, foster care and adoption could provide alternatives to residential care?

According to a research study that focused on the experiences of Roma families with Children's Services in England, many lack information about kinship care and fostering. This study involved conducting focus groups with Roma families who have personal experiences of Children's Services. The report is due to be published in early 2024. The research shows that many extended family members who have considered taking care of their relatives' children felt that they did not meet the UK standards for the provision of kinship care. Additionally, they were often scared that putting themselves forward might trigger investigations within their family circumstances. This cycle of fear and inequitable access to kinship care has worsened the impact on looked-after children. 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.

³⁵ Action For Children. (2022). *Too little, too late: Early help and early intervention spending in England*. https://media.actionforchildren.org.uk/documents/Too_Little_Too_Late_Report_Final.pdf

Therefore, there is an urgent need to:

- Improve information about kinship care/fostering amongst Roma by developing culturally appropriate and accessible resources and share them through accessible channels.
- Review viability assessments to address unique socio-economic disadvantages of Roma families who might be able to provide safe kinship/foster placements for Roma children and young people.
- Ensure Roma people are aware and can access the financial support available for kinship carers by developing culturally appropriate and accessible information resources, sharing them through accessible channels and facilitating support for Roma kinship carers to apply for it.
- Invest in raising awareness about kinship care and fostering in Roma communities by engaging with grassroots Roma initiatives and by creating multimedia resources about kinship care and fostering. There is also a need to raise awareness about socio-economic disadvantages within Roma communities, most importantly with regard to housing, within Children's Services and address assumptions that may cause unfair outcomes in viability assessments.

5. How children's social care can impact a child's educational or long-term outcomes and ways to improve outcomes for care leavers

Research shows that care placements for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children away from home are likely to be 'unsuitable', due to the fact that such placements are typically arranged outside of their communities.³⁶ The lack of kinship placements and foster carers from Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities means that cultural continuity for children in alternative care is not provided.³⁷

There is an urgent need to:

- Strengthen early intervention.
- Ensure that Roma children in foster placements outside their culture continue to be exposed to their cultural identity by training non-Roma foster parents about Roma culture and history and by providing access to Roma cultural activities.

6. The specific experiences of disabled children or children with additional needs within children's social care, how they differ from their peers, and ways to improve their experiences

According to DfE 6% of Gypsy/Roma children in need are reported as having a disability.³⁸

³⁶ Allen, D. (2014, September 12). *Care system fails Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children*. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/care-system-fails-gypsy-roma-and-traveller-children-31477>

³⁷ Allen, D. (2018). A Romani and Traveller Child's Journey through Alternative Care. In A. Allen, M. Greenfields, & D. Smith (Eds.), *Transnational Resilience and Change: Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Strategies of Survival and Adaptation*. (pp. 158–178). essay, Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

³⁸ Ahmed, N., James, D., Tayabali, A., & Watson, M. (2022, May). *Ethnicity and children's social care*. GOV.UK. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/628666598fa8f556165a1e4b/Ethnicity_and_childrens_social_care.pdf

In RSG's experience, Roma families with disabilities are more likely to find themselves in situations where support provided under child in need provision is unduly quickly escalated to child protection.

Roma parents of disabled children may need additional culturally competent support due to their disadvantages and health inequalities. RSG's experience of supporting Roma families suggests that "medical neglect" is one of the main issues leading to child protection interventions for Roma mainly due to a lack of understanding of different health conditions and how these impact on their children.

7. How effective the strategy has been so far

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care in 2022 was a comprehensive study that focused on improving the protection and care of children in the UK. However, it did not address the issue of ethnic and racial inequalities, which was a significant weakness. This demonstrates the lack of attention given to BAME children, including Roma children, in England and Wales. The government's strategy fails to address well-documented disadvantages that Roma, and other BAME children face, further exacerbating the issue.

Additionally, poverty is a key risk factor for children entering care, but the strategy does not recognise it as a serious issue that hinders good parenting and opportunities. This is of significant concern given the persistent rise in child poverty in the UK, with 4.2 million children in poverty in 2022.³⁹

³⁹ Official child poverty statistics: 350,000 more children in poverty and numbers will rise. (2023, March 23). *Child Poverty Action Group*. Retrieved from <https://cpag.org.uk/news/official-child-poverty-statistics-350000-more-children-poverty-and-numbers-will-rise>