



Introduction and welcome

To all our readers who celebrated, we hope you had a wonderful Christmas and we wish you a Happy New Year.

In total, this month's newsletter will focus on:

- Roma Support Group AGM 2021.
- The Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill.
- Issues for Roma at the UK border.
- The Health and Wellbeing Alliance.
- EU Settlement Scheme updates.
- Labour Exploitation During COVID-19 report by FLEX.
- Holocaust Memorial Day, 27 January 2022.
- A vacancy for RSG's Ketane Project.

Roma Support Group AGM 2021

In November, we held our Annual General Meeting online for the second year running. Members of our staff used the multilingual interpreting function masterfully to produce a session that took place in English, Polish and Romanian simultaneously.

The evening featured overviews from our different projects, musical performances and the re-election of four members of our board of trustees.

To view the progress of our different projects in the past year, please see our [Annual Report](#) for 2021/2022.

Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill

In November, a [Private Members' Bill](#) was introduced to Parliament which seeks to raise the minimum marriage age to 18 in England and Wales. Under current legislation, 16 and 17-year olds can enter into a marriage with parental consent. The new law would outlaw this and adults deemed to facilitate the marriage of a 16 or 17-year-old could face up to seven years in prison and a fine.

The current debate around child marriage raises harmful stereotypes and myths about Roma people in the UK, often used in the mainstream media to stigmatise our communities.

Our colleague, Mihai Bica, was recently [interviewed](#) by BBC News. He explains the reality amongst Roma communities in the UK today:

'Early marriage does not represent a huge problem overall in the community, the vast majority of our young people are not marrying early.'

Mihai also gave his view on the enforcement aspect of the legislation:

'Only enforcing it is not the right thing. In some instances, this may be the right solution because there might be some cases where this is needed. But overall, I don't think this is the right measure at this stage, or the only measure at this stage.'

As a charity, we agree with the sentiments of campaigners about increased protections for young people and wish to see a move away from marriages for children aged 16 and 17. We recognise that a statutory change will be the most effective way of guaranteeing this in the long-term. It is the immediacy of the criminalisation without a period of consultation and education that we fear could lead to harmful consequences.

Many Roma community members in the UK fear social services due to a long-history of discriminatory practices across Europe. Some professionals have been seen to act on their preconceptions and stereotypes and with a lack of cultural sensitivity and understanding. The result has been a breakdown in engagement with services. We could see the law exacerbating this further and being applied on an uneven basis and without due care. If a parent is criminalised and receives a custodial sentence in a circumstance where this is the case, it will do great harm to children, families and communities.

To avoid the damaging situations that the law in its current form could cause, we recommend the following:

- A period of consultation and education before criminal ramifications are considered.

- The formulation and employment of culturally appropriate assessments that are developed in partnership with Roma organisations and community members.
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Issues for Roma at the UK border

Government data from the first half of 2021 showed that more than **60% of EU citizens** stopped and questioned at ports by British border officials were from Romania.

In recent months, we have received verbal reports from Roma clients and cases shared amongst our professional networks that describe large numbers of Roma being stopped at the UK border or denied entry despite being legally eligible to enter.

Given this, we are concerned that a sizeable proportion of the Romanian EU citizens stopped at the UK border in the first half of 2021 were Roma, and that this is an ongoing problem.

Our concerns are compounded by a history of Roma being denied entry to the UK unfairly by immigration officials. In 2001, before the Czech Republic joined the European Union, **Amnesty International reported** that Czech citizens of Roma origin were more frequently taken aside for detailed questioning and more often refused permission to board their flights by UK immigration officials.

With EU citizens no longer protected by EU freedom of movement rights post-Brexit, we fear an increase in discrimination towards Roma resulting from a return to selective practices and the potential for unconscious bias to play a greater role in immigration controls. We will be monitoring this situation closely and encourage anyone affected, or those who know of cases, to come forward to us with their experiences and accounts.

Health and Wellbeing Alliance

Roma Support Group has joined the Health and Wellbeing Alliance (HWA) network for voluntary/ community and social enterprises to promote good health and tackle health inequalities across the UK.

For the first time, the Roma community will be represented in partnership work led by the Department of Health and NHS England on how to reduce health inequalities.

The network is backed by £2 million a year for HWA members including Age UK,

Barnardo's, Homeless Link, Hospice UK, the National Autistic Society and Samaritans to work together to ensure strong representation across the broadest range of lived experiences.

Roma Support Group will be working in consortium with Friends, Families and Travellers to ensure the voices of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people are included in discussions around health policy and accessible healthcare.

Although the Roma community is one of the most socially marginalised in the UK, there has been a lack of research and policy development on Roma people's specific health needs and outcomes.

Our first project within the network is developing a guide for health professionals on common barriers to healthcare for Roma patients and how to overcome them. There may be further opportunities for other GRT organisations to get involved, and work in partnership on specific projects to improve healthcare for the community.

Please contact mihai@romasupportgroup.org.uk or ilse@romasupportgroup.org.uk for more information about the network.

EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS) updates

The latest [EUSS statistics](#) show that 330,000 applications to the EUSS have been received since 30 June 2021. 45,000 of these were received since 30 November.

This is a reminder that it is still possible to apply to the EUSS through a [late application](#), even though the grace period deadline has passed.

Stay Settled in Newham report

Newham Council have published a [report](#) on [Stay Settled in Newham](#), an awareness-raising project on the EUSS for vulnerable residents.

RSG took part in the project as part of a consortium of voluntary and community sector organisations between March and October 2021.

The project built on Newham Council's work with the voluntary and community sector in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and came about as a result of RSG's lobbying efforts at the beginning of 2021.

Phil Veasey, Public Health Consultant at Newham, saw a Council response to the EUSS as

contributing to the Council's commitments to good health and wellbeing for individuals, their families and the borough – immigration status being key to accessing good housing, good provision for early years education, job opportunities and social connectivity. All of these areas had been exacerbated by the pandemic, and a critical response to EUSS uptake and support was seen as a key measure, particularly due to the fast-approaching application deadline of 30 June 2021.

Over the course of the project, RSG outreached over 800 Roma people through face-to-face activities and supported 86 people to submit EUSS applications.

The report recognises the continued need for support for residents who are yet to apply to the EUSS, those who struggle to manage and prove their status, and those who need to update their pre-settled status to settled status. Roma are a key group in need of support across all three of these areas. Without support, many Roma could lose their rights to work, access public services, and access benefits in the UK.

The consortium is seeking other funding options to continue providing immigration advice and training in Newham. In the meantime, the report provides recommendations for next steps.

Labour Exploitation During COVID-19 Report by FLEX

The latest [report](#) from Focus on Labour Exploitation (FLEX) looks at the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the prevalence of workplace exploitation and the circumstances that lead to it.

The report covers the particular barriers faced by Roma communities in the UK. High on the list of difficulties for Roma is access to Universal Credit. The majority of the 2,500 clients RSG sees each year are unable to complete a Universal Credit application on their own. This is largely the result of high rates of digital exclusion and functional illiteracy and a lack of access to devices such as smartphones and laptops.

Even when a person does have the skills to submit and manage an application, they can face further obstacles. If someone has pre-settled status (which RSG estimate [68% of Roma](#) granted EUSS status to have), their access to benefits is dependent on whether they can pass the Habitual Residence Test.

In order to pass, a person's work must be defined as 'genuine and effective'. FLEX state that there has been a negative perception amongst DWP officials that the work of anyone earning below a threshold of £184 per week is defined as 'marginal and ancillary' and they will not be entitled to support. This has been seen to punish people in low-paid and

insecure employment who end up having their benefits wrongly denied.

As FLEX state:

'Decisions to deny people benefits based on the earning threshold are regularly overturned after reconsideration requests backed by legal advice, but unfortunately not everyone will have known to appeal or had access to legal advice or representation.'

Whilst barriers to Universal Credit pose a major problem to Roma, other issues stem from over-reliance on Universal Credit. During the pandemic, RSG saw a great increase in the number of people coming to us for support with Universal Credit and the Self-Employment Support Scheme. They were unable to access the furlough scheme because of their type of employment.

As the report discusses:

'Universal Credit payments are significantly below the government's own measure of absolute poverty, even with the temporary £20 per week uplift. Social security payments must be enough to provide a viable alternative to exploitative work – under current measures it is not clear that this is the case.'

As one of our colleagues mentions in the report, this led to many of our clients who are on benefits accepting work during the pandemic even if it was exploitative.

FLEX provide recommendations for the government under three main headings:

- Address low-pay and insecurity at work.
- Ensure key social security provisions provide sufficient protections beyond the pandemic.
- Ensure that government policy on immigration does not bar people in need from accessing vital support.

We believe that if acted upon, these measures could alleviate the current vulnerability to workplace exploitation that our communities face.

Holocaust Memorial Day, 27 January 2022

Coming up this week on Thursday is Holocaust Memorial Day. The theme this year is **One Day**.

On 27 January at 7pm, the Holocaust Memorial Day Trust are holding a one-hour online

ceremony which you can register for [here](#).

The Trust have put together a collection of life stories for victims of the Holocaust.

Józef Sadowski, one of the few Roma Holocaust survivors living in the UK today, was interviewed by the Trust in 2018:



Below you can read about other Roma and Sinti entries:

[Amalie Schaich](#)

[Baronita Adam](#)

[The Bock Family](#)

[Ceija Stojka](#)

[Johann 'Rukeli' Trollmann](#)

[Otto Rosenberg](#)

And finally...

Vacancy for RSG's Ketane Project

RSG is advertising a new position on our [Ketane Project](#) as a Roma Shaping Futures Project Worker.

In this part-time role (14 hours per week), the post-holder will co-deliver training, advocacy and a campaigning programme to empower Roma migrant communities to attain EU Settled Status.

You can access a job pack and find the full details of the post [here](#).

The deadline for completed applications is Monday 31 January 2022.

For more information about Roma Support Group, go to our website and look at the ["projects" pages](#).

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