

Statement on the impact of EU Settlement Scheme digital-only status on the Roma Community in the UK

As organisations that support, are led by and represent the Roma community in the UK, we are concerned by the digital-only aspect of the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS). Due to a lack of digital skills in the community and insufficient support to manage Digital Status, many Roma people are finding the digital-only system creates an extra barrier to securing and managing their immigration status, and to accessing public services when support is most needed.

In 2013, official records indicated that there are 200,000 Roma living in the UK¹. As the vast majority of them are EU citizens, they are required to make applications under the EUSS in order to secure their status post-Brexit. Roma Support Group has gathered information to reflect experiences from organisations in our network through the “Roma Brexit Campaigning and Policy Project” and other delivery organisations providing EUSS support to over 7000 Roma².

The following points will inform you on how Digital Status is having an impact on our community and the potential risks posed.

1. Lack of Awareness Surrounding Digital Status

There is a lack of awareness in regard to Digital Status in the Roma community, including those supported by charities. Charities providing support to the Roma community work on informing clients on the existence and use of Digital Status through written letters and face to face appointments, however their work and resources are focused on helping as many people as possible to submit their EUSS applications. Therefore, there is limited time and resources available in helping the Roma communities with the digital aspect of applying for a new immigration status.

Furthermore, many Roma people are supported by informal third parties, who in most cases are not providing information about Digital Status at all.

Case study:

Nicoleta D. is a single mother, working in a hotel in London. She has paid a third party to support her in making a EUSS application in 2019. Nicoleta was granted Pre-Settled Status and she has the Home Office letter received via email confirming her status. In July 2020, when reaching out to a local charity for support it was identified that Nicoleta is not aware at all about the Digital Status. Furthermore, she is not aware of the details required to access it. (e. g. telephone number, email address.) Nicoleta’s English is good enough to communicate work-related issues but she can’t sustain a telephone conversation. Also, Nicoleta’s IT abilities are limited to using her mobile phone to make

1

https://www.salford.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1155666/Migrant_Roma_in_the_UK_final_report_October_2013.pdf

2

https://www.romasupportgroup.org.uk/uploads/9/3/6/8/93687016/roma_brexit_euss_report_16.06.2020_final.pdf

calls and use social media. These issues are preventing her from accessing her Digital Status as well as contacting the EUSS Settlement Resolution Centre for support.

2. Digital Exclusion

The Roma communities have historically been excluded from mainstream societies. This is mainly a feature in Eastern Europe, where majority of the Roma communities originate. The Roma communities are experiencing a combination of both digital exclusion and lack of digital skills. Here in the UK, the problem is more likely to be lack of knowledge and skills on how to use IT equipment and to access online platforms.

Roma Support Group's experience in supporting the Roma communities to access online platforms and operate IT devices such as smartphones, tablets or computers, shows that only 3% of the Roma community are able to independently complete an online application such as EUSS³.

More recently during the COVID-19 lockdown, Roma Support Group has observed that only 20% of Roma families the organisation works with had an IT device, such as a tablet or a laptop. Many families do have at least one smartphone in their household, but its usage is limited to phone calls and basic social media activities. The situation is more critical when they are required to access digital space using information available only in English.

In addition, the vast majority of Roma see the concept of Digital Status as an abstract one. We can't put it simpler than that: when mentioned on its own, Digital Status makes little sense for most Roma people. They need to be educated on the purpose of Digital Status and understand the importance of it. Charities supporting the Roma communities lack the resources needed to assist the Roma community in overcoming the barrier of low digital literacy.

3. Difficulties in Accessing and Using Digital Status

The introduction of Digital Status has caused great concern for the Roma communities. An initial confirmation of these concerns came from applicants curious to check on their status online. Many found themselves incapable of doing so due to losing access to their email address and phone number initially used for their application. In many cases they've been supported to create a new email address for single time usage, but they often lose access signing into their email.

One feature of Digital Status unfamiliar to many people is the need for holders of (pre)-settled status to continuously manage and update their digital account every time their personal details change. Cases of IT difficulties rose when applicants had a change in their circumstances such as a new phone number, email address or passport/ID number. As a result, many applicants do not have the details needed to access their Digital Status.

³ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1c_Yvx_S10Zc2UgE8z8Ql4chvscWBHRRS/view

Case study:

Stanislav and his family have lived in the UK for 15 years. They have made EUSS applications with support from a local charity and have used their passport to confirm their identity. Stanislav was aware of Digital Status. At the beginning of 2020, Stanislav's wife and children have renewed their passports. When applying for their new passports, their old ones had been retained by the issuing authority. In June 2020, Stanislav has contacted the charity asking for advice on what to do next in order to update their EUSS details. Having lost details of their old passports, they have lost access to their Digital Status online and must now contact the Home Office to get this sorted out.

A huge number of cases rose through the sporadic checks of people's status by various entities. Although Government guidance explicitly states that third parties cannot ask EU citizens to prove their status under the EU Settlement Scheme until after 30 June 2021⁴, many have reported on their experience of being checked. The Government needs to give very clear information on this issue to public and private organisations such as employers and landlords.

In other cases, a digital-only status adds to the barriers that Roma people are already experiencing in accessing public services. This is worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic, as hundreds of thousands of people had to apply for Universal Credit (UC) and many were required to access their EUSS Digital Status in order to have their UC applications processed. This situation has seen many Roma facing huge problems created by their inability to access the Digital Status. This has transpired in cases of families experiencing poverty, evictions, and mental health difficulties.

Case studiesHealth Services

S is a mother of two who has been living in the UK since 2018. With support from a local charity, she made her EUSS application and has been granted Pre-Settled Status. A few months later, S reported that she had a hospital appointment and she was asked to provide proof of her status. S approached the charity and requested to have her confirmation letter printed because she struggled to access her email.

Student Finance

K applied for Settled Status with support from a local charity. When applying for Student Finance he was asked to provide proof of his status for his application. In February 2020, K approached the charity requesting to have his EUSS confirmation letter printed. At that time K said (regarding digital status) "I know there is something on the internet, but I have no idea where can I find it and how can I get into it". Unfortunately, K's Settled Status application is still pending and therefore the charity was not able to assist with his request.

Universal Credit –

Case 1: *Gina has lost her husband to COVID-19 on Easter day. He was the father to Gina's children and was the breadwinner in the family. He benefitted from his wages and the family's tax credits.*

⁴<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/employing-eu-eea-and-swiss-citizens-and-their-family-members-after-brex-it>

Furthermore, he was the only one who had the details of his family's EUSS applications. Two weeks after his passing, Gina learned that their tax credit entitlement was suspended. Gina then tried to apply for Universal Credit. Through the process she was required to share her EUSS Digital Status. Gina was not able to do that, both because she didn't know how to access it and also because she didn't have the details needed to do so. Gina's UC application was declined twice, each time after she wasn't able to share her Digital Status.

Case 2: *W was granted Settled Status. He made an application for Universal Credit but encountered difficulties. He reported to a local charity which had supported his EUSS application, that he failed the Habitual Residence Test despite providing a printed copy of a confirmation letter issued by the Home Office. The Job Centre adviser informed him that the letter is not a valid document and that they will contact the Home Office directly to confirm his status.*

4. Roma with Pre-Settled Status

Insufficient data has been provided on how many Roma have applied to the EUSS so far and been granted Settled or Pre-Settled Status, as EU Settlement Scheme data sets released by the Home Office do not include a breakdown on ethnicities. By March 2020, Roma Support Group has assisted over 1000 Roma community members with submitting their EUSS applications, and found that 62% of those supported were granted Pre-Settled Status. The national average is 41%⁵. All those granted Pre-Settled Status will have to re-apply for Settled Status within five years or lose their status altogether. We are concerned that since Roma are more likely to have trouble accessing and managing their digital status, they are more likely to have difficulty securing their immigration status once their Pre-Settled Status expires.

Conclusion

The evidence provided in this statement demonstrates the difficulties created by the Digital Status. The Roma community is not aware of Digital Status and find it very difficult to understand and access it. Professionals and frontline workers working for public services and/ or private entities are not aware of it or not instructed on how to use it. These factors are seriously increasing the likelihood of the Roma community of:

- a) Being unable to access and manage their own immigration status;
- b) Being exploited by third parties offering unqualified or paid-for "support", by rogue landlords or into illegal work;
- c) Being unable to access employment or housing;
- d) Being unable to access public services including social security support when needed;
- e) Increasing the pressure on public services and voluntary organisations to provide support when in crisis situations.

⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/eu-settlement-scheme-statistics>

We recommend that the Government makes the following adjustments to the EU Settlement Scheme:

1. Enable facilities, resources and support to allow all those who need it to receive physical evidence of their status in the UK.
2. Develop programs to enable community groups, organisations and public authorities to provide on-going digital support when issues arise. This would include training to help those in need to access, use and keep their Digital Status up to date.

This statement was developed by Roma Support Group in collaboration with organisations networking within the Roma Brexit Campaigning and Policy Project and is supported by the following organisations:

Clifton Learning Partnership
Communityworks
Grandby Toxteth Development Trust
Luton Roma Trust
New Europeans
Public Law Interest Centre
Roma in the Lead Project
Roma Support Group
Seraphus Solicitors
Settled
TGP Cymru – Travelling Ahead Project
The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants
The3Million