

Written evidence from Roma Support Group, supported by Law for Life (CSC 148)

Education Committee
Children's Social Care

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 the research report [Come to us in a peaceful way: Improving experiences of Roma families with children's services in England](#), written by Law for Life, [Anglia Ruskin University](#), and [Lancaster University](#) (Centre for Child and Family Justice Research). Combining analysis of care proceedings cases that involve Roma families, consultation 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.

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.¹

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.²

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%.³ 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.”⁴ In Bulgaria, while the Roma comprise less than 10% of the population, they account for more than 60% of the children's home population.⁵ In Slovakia, that number rises to 80%.⁶

The views of Roma and those who support them

Recent research shows that experiences of Roma families with children's services in England are largely negative, either due to lack of cultural competence, 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, stemming from low legal capability amongst Roma parents, leads to a lack of accountability which means that failure to follow professional standards and statutory guidance often goes unchallenged.⁷

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ Department for Education. (n.d.-a). *Children looked after in England including adoptions*. GOV.UK.

⁴ 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>

⁵ 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

⁶ Ibid.

Civil society groups have reported gaps in knowledge and skills among children's services working with Roma families.⁸ Additionally, they have found that children's services often do not address various barriers and multiple disadvantages that Roma families face. Effective 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.⁹

Public services in the UK, including the Department for Education (DfE), face challenges in data collection and monitoring concerning Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) communities. Current practices often fail to disaggregate data, grouping Roma and Gypsy ethnicities together while treating Irish Travellers as a separate category.¹⁰ This approach obscures the unique characteristics of each group, hindering precise data analysis and the development of tailored services. Without disaggregated data, policymakers risk relying on assumptions or generalisations, leading to ineffective or harmful policies. To address this, the DfE should include a distinct Roma category in all ethnic monitoring efforts

3. Factors affecting children's services engagement with Roma

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

3A. Lack of awareness about Roma people's experiences of marginalisation and discrimination

Equality National Survey revealed that 47% of GRT people reported experiencing racial assaults, while 37% had encountered physical attacks.¹¹ A survey conducted by Pew

⁷ Boyce, M., Coker, S., Greenfields, M., Felja, D., Kostka, J., Radley, Ch. (2024) *Come to us in a peaceful way: Improving experiences of Roma families with children's services in England*, Anglia Ruskin University, Lancaster University, Law for Life.

⁸ Roma Rights Forum, run by the Roma Support Group.

⁹ Boyce, M., Coker, S., Greenfields, M., Felja, D., Kostka, J., Radley, Ch. (2024) *Come to us in a peaceful way: Improving experiences of Roma families with children's services in England*, Anglia Ruskin University, Lancaster University, Law for Life.

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.

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 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.

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. This fear was starkly evident in Leeds, where riots broke out after Roma children were removed from their families, highlighting the deep mistrust towards state authorities.¹⁶ Without an understanding of the historical and ongoing discrimination, such events are likely to recur, as actions by public agencies may be perceived as unjust or oppressive.

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.¹⁷

Recent research on experiences of Roma families with children's services in England also highlights lack of cultural competence as one of the barriers to effective engagement between children's services and Roma families.¹⁸ Similarly, 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

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.

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 [Council to review child protection case that triggered Leeds unrest](#), Guardian, July 20204

¹⁷ Clarke, A. (2022, April 1). [Serious Case Review Overview Report: Anna](#). NSPCC.

¹⁸ Boyce, M. et al. (2024) *Come to us in a peaceful way: Improving experiences of Roma families with children's services in England*, Anglia Ruskin University, Lancaster University, Law for Life.

Data from the 2021 Census highlights low English proficiency among Roma communities: 27.2% of Romanian Roma, 29.5% of Portuguese Roma, and 32.9% of Slovak Roma have limited English skills. Across Europe, 10% of Roma are completely illiterate, and 40%-60% of adult Roma in the EU are functionally illiterate.¹⁹

Roma people primarily speak Romanes, their native language, yet interpreting services in England rarely provide support in Romanes. Additionally, interpreters from Roma families' countries of origin may harbor discriminatory attitudes, which can distort interpretations and contribute to inaccurate or biased assessments by professionals.

4. Factors contributing to children's services interventions in Roma families

Based on RSG's experience working with Roma families in a social care context, as well as feedback from professionals attending RSG training, the majority of Roma families are investigated under the category of neglect. This is often closely linked to their socio-economic disadvantages, including inadequate housing, unemployment, low educational attainment, and health inequalities.

This observation aligns with findings from the Ethnicity and Children's Social Care Independent Review, which identified neglect as a primary factor in referrals of Gypsy/Roma children. The review highlights the following key issues:

4A. Housing

26.5% of Roma live in overcrowded conditions, compared to 8.4% of the overall population (2021 Census).²⁰

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

54% of Roma are employed, slightly below the 59.6% employment rate of the overall population (2021 Census).²¹

28.5% work in elementary occupations (e.g., cleaners, seasonal helpers), significantly higher than the general population's 10.5%.²²

¹⁹ 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>

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ *ibid*.

²² *ibid*.

4C. Education

20% of Roma aged 16+ are illiterate, compared to less than 1% of the EU population (EU Fundamental Rights Agency, 2014).²³

Only 27% complete mandatory schooling by age 18 (FRA, 2022).²⁴

In England and Wales, 30.9% of Roma have no qualifications, and just 26% achieve higher education.²⁵

Lower educational attainment hinders understanding of child protection systems and awareness of legal rights.

4D. Health

Roma face significant barriers to accessing and navigating health services.²⁶

These challenges affect their ability to address health issues and improve family well-being without additional support.

PART B

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

Current provision falls short of meeting the growing demand for information, assistance, and support for Roma families. To address this, the Local Authorities and particularly children's services should:

- Provide resources and training: Develop accessible materials and training for child protection professionals on Roma culture, history, and culturally competent engagement.
- Collaborate with Roma advocates: Partner with Roma advocates or charities to effectively engage and support Roma families in child protection contexts.
- Increase Roma representation: Ensure Roma representation within the children's social care workforce.
- Promote culturally competent practices: Adopt well-informed and culturally sensitive approaches to working with Roma families.

²³ 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.

²⁴ European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights. (2022, October 25). *Roma in 10 European countries - Main results*.

²⁵ Office for National Statistics. (2023, October 30). [Roma populations, England and Wales: Census 2021](#).

²⁶ Office for Health Improvement and Disparities. (2022, November 3). [Improving Roma health: A guide for health and care professionals](#). GOV.UK.

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

Child poverty is the primary factor driving increased demand for children's social care.

According to the FRA, over 90% of Roma children are at risk of poverty.²⁷ In England and Wales, the London School of Economics found that nearly a quarter of Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) children under 19 live in deprivation, compared to just 2% of all other children.²⁸ A 2022 study confirmed that child poverty is a key risk factor for children entering care, with poorer areas experiencing higher rates of care placement. Notably, a 1% increase in child poverty was associated with an additional five children entering care per 100,000 children.²⁹

In addition, the lack of institutional knowledge about Roma families and their unique challenges affects how professionals engage with Roma families to prevent family breakdown. There are no systematic strategies to address this knowledge gap:

- No ongoing CPD training or resources on Roma culture and needs.
- Limited collaboration with community advocates during family interventions.
- Insufficient investment in recruiting social workers from Roma backgrounds.

Despite the increase in the Roma population following the A8 (2004) and A2 (2007) EU accessions, confirmed by the 2021 Census to be 103,200 Roma people in England and Wales, children's services have failed to adequately address these knowledge gaps, leaving Roma families underserved.

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

A recently published research report looking into experiences of Roma families with children's services shows that Roma families lack information about kinship care and foster care.³⁰ As a result, very few Roma adults involved in this research 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.

²⁷ 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.

²⁸ 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>

²⁹ 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)

³⁰ Boyce, M. et al. (2024) *Come to us in a peaceful way: Improving experiences of Roma families with children's services in England*, Anglia Ruskin University, Lancaster University, Law for Life.

DfE data shows that a staggering 52% of Gypsy/Roma children are recorded as being placed out-of-area.³¹ 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.

Research indicates that this lack of early intervention can contribute to higher costs in children's social care systems.³² 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 26 years 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.

³¹ 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

³² Action For Children. (2022). [Too little, too late: Early help and early intervention spending in England](#).

- 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.³³ This study involved conducting focus groups with Roma families who have lived experience of involvement with children's services. 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 own families. This cycle of fear and inequitable access to kinship care has worsened the impact on looked-after children. Consequently, 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.

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

³³ Boyce, M. et al. (2024) [Come to us in a peaceful way: Improving experiences of Roma families with children's services in England](#), Anglia Ruskin University, Lancaster University, Law for Life.

regarding 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 indicates that care placements for Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller (GRT) children are often unsuitable because they are typically arranged outside their communities.³⁴ The shortage of kinship placements and foster carers from GRT backgrounds prevents cultural continuity for GRT children in alternative care, disrupting their connection to their heritage and identity.³⁵

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.³⁶ In RSG's experience, Roma families with disabilities are more likely to find themselves in situations where support provided under the 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.³⁷ However, it did not

³⁴ Allen, D. (2014, September 12). [Care system fails Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children](#). The Conversation

³⁵ 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.

³⁶ Ahmed, N., James, D., Tayabali, A., & Watson, M. (2022, May). [Ethnicity and children's social care](#). GOV.UK.

³⁷ MacAlister, J. (2022, May). [The independent review of children's social care: Final report](#), The independent

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 the well-documented disadvantages that Roma, and other BAME children face, further exacerbating the issue.³⁸

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 The newly established Child poverty taskforce should engage with representatives of the Roma civil society and ensure that the unique socio-economic disadvantages of Roma communities in the UK are addressed in its strategy (due for publication in Spring 2025).

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review of children's social care.

³⁸ Elgee, A. (2024, October). [Family poverty and the care system](#), Together Trust Charity.

³⁹ Child Poverty Action Group (2023, March) [Official child poverty statistics: 350,000 more children in poverty and numbers will rise](#)