

Written evidence submitted by Forward South Partnership, relating to The experiences of minority ethnic and migrant people in Northern Ireland Inquiry (MEM0031)

Introduction

Forward South Partnership (FSP) is a community regeneration organisation bringing together all sectors to lead the regeneration of South Belfast. FSP is governed by a cross-sectoral board including statutory and private sector representatives as well as those from the community which are elected to the board through a comprehensive democratic election process.

Forward South Partnership is the parent organisation for the Roma Support Hub which grew out of a helpline that was created in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. Peace IV funding was granted to continue the work of the helpline and create a more substantive Support Hub for the Roma Community. The Roma Hub now includes a telephone helpline, offers in-person Welfare and EUSS appointments and entails a Building Positive Relation (BPR) programme. The Roma Hub offers capacity building and skill development workshops, as well as fostering positive relations between the Roma and the wider Belfast community. The Roma Hub also organises a variety of intercultural events and activities.

FSP and Roma Hub staff work collaboratively with key partners to strengthen all aspects of the Roma Support Hub with the aim of delivering wraparound support for the Roma in Belfast and ultimately encouraging their inclusion and integration in all aspects of life in Northern Ireland. The project partners help to deliver aspects of the BPR programme and act as a steering group to strategically guide the work of the Hub. Steering Partners include South Belfast Surestart, who leads on early years and family programmes in south Belfast and delivers a weekly Mother and Baby Café for Roma women and their families, South Belfast Roundtable, who lead on tackling racism and deliver good relations programmes; Chinese Welfare Association who develop capacity and advocate for the Chinese and diverse communities; Belfast Health and Social Care Trust; and the Intercultural Education Service Roma Support Unit of the Education Authority.

Roma in Belfast

The Roma in Northern Ireland is not a homogenous community and several nationalities are represented, including Bulgarian, Hungarian, Slovakian and Romanian and there is a range of religious and socio-economic differences among them. The majority of Roma in Belfast are from Romania and this group tend to be the main beneficiaries of the Roma Support Hub.

The initial Roma Helpline became operational in April 2020 as Covid-19 exacerbated the already precarious situation facing the Roma Community in Belfast. The Roma Helpline was created as a bridge between the community and services with the aim of providing necessary help for the community to instil faith and understanding that statutory and non-statutory services are free and to be trusted. The helpline initially disseminated information relating to Covid-related symptoms, travel restrictions and required self-isolation. Since the beginning of the initial helpline, referrals are also made to foodbanks for emergency food, baby formula and nappies and information/signposting has been provided for a wide spectrum of issues, including immigration and the EU Settlement Scheme; Universal Credit applications; general welfare and benefit entitlements; housing; education; hate crime; National Insurance Number applications; employment, tax, registering with a GP, and accessing help for utilities gas and electric.

Since February 2021 the Roma Support Hub project has grown in staff and ambition and has endeavoured to deliver a Building Positive Relations (BPR) programme in addition to a Helpline and in-person Advice Clinics, funded by SEUPB by way of contract through Belfast City Council.

Through delivery of the BPR, increased engagement with the individuals from the Roma Community has led to growing understanding of the very complex needs facing many within the community. Although the Roma Support Hub is not equipped to provide adequate evidence around each area in question, and although we cannot speak *on behalf* of the community, we would like the opportunity to provide some feedback and give voice to at least some members of the community around two of the points:

- the challenges that minority ethnic and migrant people face in Northern Ireland;
- people's experiences of applying for the EU Settlement Scheme.

The information presented below in relation to these two points was collected for the purpose of this submission at a weekly meeting of the Roma Hub Women's Group and through people accessing support through the helpline.

The challenges that Roma people face in Northern Ireland - among the most significant challenges that the Roma face are those relating to housing, discrimination and prejudice, which are inextricably linked.

a. Housing

Evidence would suggest that there is a cyclical problem for the Roma renting in Belfast. Roma often live with various family members together in one home. A large number of people living in a small home will undoubtedly take a physical toll on house and overcrowded houses often lead to a variety of problems including noise and a build-up of rubbish. These issues can lead to conflict or unwanted attention from neighbours and the Belfast City Council.

However, many Roma often have great difficulty finding rentals and are forced to rely on a family member or someone from the community to take them in. Roma believe that landlords generally do not want to rent to them. One woman stated that despite living in the same house for over 5 years and despite doing her best to keep the house tidy and maintain the house, her calls to the landlord are ignored and not returned when she has tried to ring about maintenance or repairs. Another woman said that she has been waiting 2 years for the landlord to replace the back door since it was first broken. This type of treatment is not confined to one area of Belfast, but in South Belfast has detrimental impact of good relations within the area and fractures feelings of community cohesion. There is the perception that landlords around Queens University in the Holylands area apparently respond more favourably to student renters, despite the fact that they are generally short-term tenants and less likely to care for a rental, which the Roma find frustrating and 'unfair'.

Again, given that the Roma often find it difficult to find housing, individuals are often reliant of families and friends to put them up thus leading to overcrowded homes. Despite having close relationships, it is usually *not by choice* that multiple families or generations live together in one home; it is a necessity born out of the fact that rents are often too high or that housing is simply not made available to the Roma. One woman produced approximately 15-20 photographs of 'to let' boards with agency telephone numbers posted outside of houses which she had rung in the past week. She stated that she was often hung up on when she rang multiple agencies to enquire about the rentals and, as a result, remains living with her 3 children in the two bedroom house of her sister and her sister's 3 young children.

The Roma are well aware that it is unsightly to hang washing on the footpath, occasionally hanging clothes on the temporary signs where construction work is being done on the footpaths or on scaffolding. However, when there is a large number of people living in a home without a tumble dryer, there simply is nowhere else to dry clothing. They know they are being 'judged' by their neighbours and are uncomfortable that this is perceived as a 'typical' thing for Roma people to do. It is done out of necessity and with embarrassment.

Tackling discrimination, which is fundamentally at the heart of the denial of the right to adequate housing for many people, including Roma migrants, is vital. Many Roma see their treatment as being not simply because they are foreign, but because they are Roma. They recognise that, as in every culture and society, there are Roma who do not take care of things and might 'trash' a rental, but are emphatic that most are 'not like that'.

The Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025 states, 'If we are to tackle racism and racial inequalities effectively, we need to be clear about what it is we are dealing with. Racism manifests itself in a variety of ways, both subtle and overt. It can range from snubs and exclusion through to discrimination, the creation of barriers to inclusion that can emerge at all levels in public and private institutions, to acts of intimidation'¹. Bearing this in mind, it should be noted that some landlords in Belfast, notably in the Holylands area where many Roma have lived since initially arriving in Northern Ireland, are known to the PSNI and Belfast City Council as engaging in underhanded and intimidating behaviour, which is difficult for both tenants and local community development workers to contend with.

b. Prejudice and racism manifesting in Bullying

People speak of not feeling welcome and being looked at suspiciously on the streets and in shops. The women expressed feeling intimidated and do not understand why people in Belfast are not more welcoming to them. People, young and old, shout at them in the streets telling them to go back home. This type of prejudice may be similar for many migrants, but nonetheless difficult to rationalise.

The prejudice that the Roma feel is tangible. It is pervasive and impacts on all ages. But worryingly, this prejudice would seem to be a factor in the underachievement of many young people. It is often perceived that the Roma do not value education and that young people leave school because schooling is not considered important. On the contrary, the opportunity for their children to get a good education and have the *potential* to go to university and ultimately get a job like a 'doctor or teacher', is a primary reason for many Roma coming to Northern Ireland.

Many Roma children do leave school at 16, and even 15, although many mothers recognise the value of children completing school. Being able to get a job at 15 - regardless of whether that is legal or not - is a factor, but bullying is a significant factor pushing young Roma away from school. The recollections that young people themselves shared and the stories that mothers told of their children being bullied were pervasive, profound and heart-breaking. Children, at both primary and

¹ Northern Ireland Executive, Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025, <https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/ofmdfm/racial-equality-strategy-2015-2025.pdf>

secondary level, are physically, mentally and emotionally bullied by their non-Roma peers. Schools do on occasion intervene, but it seems to have little consequence.

Roma experiences of applying for the EU Settlement Scheme

There is a theory that Brexit and resultant EUSS restrictions, along with COVID restrictions, led to a reduction in the Roma population in Belfast. It seems too early to gauge whether this is temporary or whether people will return now that Covid restrictions have begun to ease and the new school year has started. But it is necessary to bear in mind that many of the Roma who are living in Belfast are some of the most vulnerable and may also be some of those who were least likely to adequately understand what was required of them in relation to applying for EUSS, provided that the correct information even filtered down to them and that they were even aware that there are new requirements in place.

For example, the Hub has been dealing with a high number of late EUSS applications for the past number of weeks. There have been a significant number of people who did apply for Settled Status, but had been unaware that they needed to also apply for each of their children. A significant number of people are illiterate and have neither Romani, Romanian nor English. Few people have the adequate language and computer-literacy skills to apply for EUSS (or Universal Credit, or a national insurance number, etc). There have been a number of young women (some single mothers and some new wives planning to join their husbands who live in Belfast) arriving off planes from Romania arriving in Dublin without prior knowledge of the EUSS and with the anticipation of settling in Belfast. Hub staff have been faced with several distraught women with little to no hope of being granted legal status to stay in Northern Ireland, some of whom have arrived with little more than the clothes they are wearing and no recourse to any statutory support.

One man, who is by no means an isolated case, only recently learnt of the requirement to apply for the EU Settlement Scheme. This gentleman, who is illiterate and possesses no understanding of English, has lived in Northern Ireland for over 10 years and is paid cash-in-hand. He has been working for various farmers over the years, including picking apples each autumn for the same farmer. Because this gentleman lives hand-to-mouth and until recently had never registered with a GP, or applied for benefits, etc, he has no proof that he has lived here for a decade. And needless to say the farmer for whom he has worked for many years is not willing to vouch on his behalf. It would seem unlikely that he will be granted settled status and be permitted to remain in Northern Ireland.

The very process of proving one's immigration status is complicated and requires access to a computer and IT skills, all the more difficult for a population with a high rate of illiteracy. The process of applying for EUSS requires the creation of computer-generated share-code, which is valid for thirty days; this is hard for people lacking computer skills. If the process takes more than thirty days, which it often does, then the share-code expires, and they have to start again. This entire process in turn makes accessing Universal Credit challenging. If the individual has been out of the UK for more than six months, which many have as a result of Covid and resultant restrictions and lack of work, they may not be able to apply for EUSS.

Recommendations

Although immigration per se is an 'excepted matter', many related areas of public policy provision for migrants, including housing, are dealt with as devolved matters. As such the UK government should support the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that the Roma Community indeed has access to 'adequate housing'. The government should bear in mind the *Report of the Special Rapporteur on adequate housing as a component of the right to an adequate standard of living, and*

on the right to non-discrimination in this context (June 2021) and adhere to the *Guidelines for the implementation of the right to adequate housing* (December 2019).

In parallel with efforts to 'tackle' racism, it is equally important to celebrate diversity and acknowledge the valuable role that migrants play in society. Indeed, challenging *discrimination* - which can be done through advocacy, monitoring, policy changes and legal challenges, needs to happen hand in hand alongside confronting *prejudice* and enlighten people through campaigning, intercultural events, education and exchange. This should apply to all levels of society, including with school children as a means to address bullying, and with adults as a way to overcome intolerance. These efforts should not be considered soft or of having less value.

Conclusion

Forward South Partnership and the Roma Hub staff welcome the opportunity to make this submission and very much appreciate the concession made in allowing a late submission to be considered. We are happy to discuss the submission and to become involved in discussions about the issues raised above and how they might be addressed going forward.

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