

Sheffield Roma Support Network

Sheffield Roma Support Network was founded in 2015 to help the Roma community by helping us understand our rights and responsibilities, and to work towards achieving representation for the community in local governance structures, with a view to integrating our community successfully and informing the wider community about our culture, heritage, and traditions.

Upon our community's arrival in Sheffield, there was no-one to support us and help us to settle into our lives here. We settled together in the Page Hall area due to the inexpensive housing and safety in numbers, as this was an area that already had existing migrant communities in this area. We found that our local community centre FCH welcomed us and we started volunteering there, which led to us setting up SRSN.

Our community has faced 1000 years of persecution. We are misunderstood and have been discriminated against in every country. We have found that we are discriminated against in the UK but we don't fear for our lives here so we are committed to becoming part of the UK as other migrant groups have done. We want to integrate as other communities have done and be a part of Sheffield life. We hope that we can have the opportunity to explain our experiences here and understand how we can be a part of society successfully while maintaining our unique cultural traditions and heritage. We also want to talk about our experiences of discrimination in the UK and hope that this is a chance to improve equalities for our community.

We acknowledge that investments have been made into local schools and GP surgeries, but this investment has been made through a distant assessment of needs without consultation – money has been spent on Slovak interpreters rather than Roma for example - and it is the feeling of many in our community that we are again being seen as a problem community to be solved, rather than a valued part of Sheffield society being built up and supported to make a real contribution to city life.

About this submission

This submission has been arranged thematically. Themes have been joined together where there is significant crossover. Details of inequalities and recommendations have been formulated based on interviews with members of the Roma community, staff and volunteers using focus groups on Zoom, street engagement work and individual responses, with a broad cross section of the local Roma community based predominantly in the Page Hall area and surrounding areas including Grimesthorpe and Firth Park.

1. Communities and Policing

We have found that authorities don't understand what our needs are and how to communicate with us properly. We are unrepresented politically, and have few opportunities to make our voice heard in civic life.

1. Roma have moved to the UK from countries where we were excluded from society. Because of our experiences, new arrivals often hide their Roma heritage, so it is likely that authorities underestimate the number of Roma citizens in the UK.

2. The systems here are different than what we're used to and our recent arrivals don't always understand how to use them, for example, separating rubbish for recycling, and registering with a GP surgery and making appointments. Our organisation tries to communicate this to new arrivals but we are small and not properly funded and have limited resources to get to everyone quickly when they arrive.
3. Because of our history of discrimination we are afraid of authorities especially the police. This makes trusting the police difficult.
4. Our laws in our countries of origin were different, and we don't always understand all the rules in the UK, especially antisocial behaviour. Our first experience with these laws is usually when enforcement happens.

Recommendations:

- Authorities should be trained about Roma history and needs so that they understand how to communicate with us more effectively
- SRSN should be given information about new arrivals so that as a trusted partner we can inform them of their rights and responsibilities quickly to prevent misunderstandings
- Authorities should be told about our network so that we can advise them
- We should be funded properly so that we can carry out more work alongside partners to build trust for authorities in the UK
- If we build trust and understanding, we will be in a better position to achieve representation for our community so that we have a say.

2. Education

We are proud that our children are being educated in the UK as we feel that this way they will have better opportunities in life. We all want the best for our children.

1. Our children do not always have a good experience at school. At secondary school relationships start breaking down, and other children and adults often bully our children with old discriminatory stereotypes about gypsies. We are proud of our gypsy heritage and our children are made to feel ashamed of this at school.
2. People making assumptions based on stereotypes criminalises our children, causing them to behave the way people think they will. When children are young their identity is fragile.
3. This behaviour leads to our children being excluded from school, but parents are not always aware that their children are being excluded, thinking instead that their children are being moved to better schools. We come across parents often whose children are attending inclusion units and the parents say that they are in good schools. We don't know who is telling them this.

4. Growing up with experiences like this limits what our children can achieve in life. This causes problems for them and society misses out on the contribution they could make if they had better outcomes in education.
5. Parents did not always receive a good standard of education in our countries of origin so are unable to help children with homework etc.

Recommendations:

- Parents should be informed better about the process of school and the role of inclusion units.
- Parents need to be able to access services via schools to help them to support their children with homework. There is an imbalance in how well schools support parents.
- Schools teach children that racism is wrong but they don't teach children about discrimination against gypsy groups so the Roma community isn't recognised in this teaching, so our children don't understand that the things people say about them aren't true. Schools should teach children and staff that discrimination against Roma is racism.

3. Living in the UK – Housing and Employment

As we arrive from a background of heavy discrimination and exclusion, at first we don't know our rights and responsibilities. This leaves the Roma community vulnerable to exploitation.

1. We are often living in overcrowded conditions because rents are expensive and we have to share between families so that we can pay the bills. This means that we are living in too small houses where we cannot afford to have a room for socialising, as all rooms have to be for sleeping, and the small yards are not big enough for us to socialise there. Spending time outdoors at home also leads to complaints from neighbours, so we end up meeting up outside the shops. We know that this can appear frightening to people walking past big groups, but we have no choice.
2. We often work for agencies, casual work, and seasonal work. Here we are usually paid by the day. Agencies often take big fees away from our wages. When we tell new arrivals that this is illegal and about minimum wage, they usually say that they have no choice or that some money is better than no money. Nobody wants to speak out because they are afraid that they will not be able to get work anymore and because people are desperate for whatever they can get. People don't understand that in the worst cases this is a type of modern slavery. They are just grateful to be earning.
3. There are not many opportunities to improve our lives. People live hand to mouth every day and have to work every day to survive. This doesn't leave any room for them to take classes or learn.
4. When members of our community have done well, they have been treated with suspicion or shot down, for example a member of our community was working as a project worker and when he made a mistake with some paperwork the council demanded he be sacked even though he was cleared by the court, and UK Kidz was set up to help young people but it came under very heavy scrutiny and had to close because the pressure was too intense.

Recommendations:

- More understanding from authorities about why we are mixing outside the home. Solving issues around exploitation at work would give us more pay and help us to live in more suitable conditions with fewer people sharing a house. Then we would be able to socialise at home instead.
- More places for us to go and meet away from houses and away from the shops.
- Educating people about their rights at work only goes so far because people are desperate. If more employers and agencies were prosecuted for breaking rules around minimum wage then this would help make sure that others no longer try to get away with it and workers would have to be paid properly.
- Flexible options for classes and courses that help us to access them without worrying about shift work.

5. Health

Roma community have poorer health outcomes than the settled community. This is often said to be because of our lifestyle choices, but is instead related to poverty that our community experiences because of the nature of the employment choices we have access to meaning that our income is limited and unreliable.

1. Because our community lives in poverty, the priority when buying food is on it being cheap and filling rather than nutritious. It is cheaper to buy poor quality junk food than fruits and vegetables, and cheap cuts of meat are often fatty. This is affecting our health.
2. There is limited awareness of how and when to attend routine screening appointments. We are used to seeing doctors only when there is an emergency, so many members of our community will only see their doctors when there is something seriously wrong, which means that dangerous conditions such as cancer could be going undetected.
3. Members of our community are not aware of other services they can access, such as blood pressure checks and services offered by pharmacies. This information seems to be intuitive for the settled community, but our community needs better information.
4. We have found that members of our community have had mixed experiences with interpreters provided by the health services, who typically use Slovak speakers rather than Roma speakers to communicate with those using health services. Slovak isn't our first language, and it's difficult for us to understand all the information especially when it is complicated.

Recommendations:

- Information on health services, which to use when, and how to access other support should be made available for all future migrant groups upon their settlement in the UK and for the Roma community
- Roma interpreters to be used by health services
- Better access to nutritious food, such as local outlets for waste and surplus food. We are aware of organisations like Food Works but it is difficult to access without a car. Improving our diets will improve our health.

5. Negative media attention

Coverage about our community in local media has been very negative. We are treated as a problem that needs a solution, rather than a community in need of support. Some of the language used has been as if we are not human. We have included examples below of negative press we have received, and posts on social media that are discriminatory or include discriminatory comments.

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/787740287956898/permalink/3526692424061657/>

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/787740287956898/permalink/3460788363985397/>

<https://www.examinerlive.co.uk/news/local-news/fury-jeremy-kyle-estate-kids-18240756>

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