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Dear Council Leader,

This letter is addressing the concerns of the Roma communities in the period of the COVID-19 pandemic. There are approximately 200,000 migrant Roma living in the UK¹.

Considering the following context:

a) Health

- The Roma population across Europe has a considerably shorter life expectancy compared to the non-Roma population. Across European Union countries, data on life expectancy for the Roma population indicates estimates ranging from 7-20 fewer years of life².
- Roma in the older age groups (65+) report a much steeper increase in chronic disease related problems (70% compared to 56% for non-Roma)³.

We believe that the disproportionate poor health of Roma across Europe make Roma communities in the UK particularly vulnerable to developing severe illness from COVID-19.

b) Accommodation

- Most Roma in the UK live in poor areas and the majority are renting in the private sector. Many are renting from unscrupulous or rogue landlords and the majority of Roma are not aware of their statutory rights.⁴
- Many Roma live in shared houses with no security over their accommodations.

We are concerned that Roma will face problems securing their tenancies in the event that they lose their means to pay rent. If this happens, they will be left without the ability to follow social distancing or self-isolation measures. They are also a group less well able to access the IT complexity of the government programmes designed to prevent eviction and secure assistance with paying rent. This might also add further pressure on local authorities to source suitable accommodations.

¹ https://www.salford.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0003/1155666/Migrant_Roma_in_the_UK_final_report_October_2013.pdf

² https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/social_determinants/docs/2014_roma_health_report_es_en.pdf

³ https://ec.europa.eu/health/sites/health/files/social_determinants/docs/2014_roma_health_report_es_en.pdf

⁴ <https://www.gypsy-traveller.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/NRIS-CSMR.pdf>

c) Rough sleeping

- There are significant numbers of Roma sleeping rough in UK's major cities. The CHAIN 2018/2019 – Greater London, report recorded a total of 8,855 rough sleepers. Out of these, 7% were recorded as Gypsy/Roma/Travellers. Language barriers and lack of trust in services are making it difficult for them to engage with services. Roma community representatives must be resourced to engage effectively with the rough sleeping Roma.

Those sleeping rough have no access to proper sanitation, nor do they have the opportunity to isolate themselves. With healthcare provision and other resources under strain, it is likely that homeless Roma, who are already without access to basic healthcare provision, are posed the highest risk. Additionally, various public and voluntary organisations are reporting limited engagement with rough sleeping Roma due to language and trust barriers.

Government has asked England's local authorities to accommodate all rough sleepers by 29 March 2020⁵. We are concerned there will be language and trust barriers preventing rough sleeping Roma accessing facilities available.

d) Employment

- Many Roma work in unskilled roles and in the sectors where job and income security are weakest. This includes factory work, construction work and cleaning jobs. They are often on zero hours contracts or as self-employed. Some are working in precarious conditions with no contracts and are paid via cash in hand.
- Many Roma, especially those living in big cities, are Big Issue vendors. Because of the outbreak of Covid19, all of them have now lost their income⁶. Many are in very vulnerable situations. **Our experience tells us that in some cases, for accessing benefits purpose, their self-employment is not considered genuine.**

With regard to the economic effects that the outbreak of Covid19 is causing, we believe that Roma in the UK will be put under severe and disproportionate financial strain. Roma in these roles are at a high risk of losing their jobs or not being able to work due to heavily reduced demand. In this event, they have no safety net. They may have immense difficulty accessing welfare provision or finding new work. They may not be eligible or get support to access government Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme through their employer. Also, those self-employed are told the government will contact them. We are concerned how that may happen. Additionally, limited English levels will prevent many from accessing the information and support available.

e) Education

- Most Roma in the EU have received limited education. This situation is not dissimilar in the UK with regard to the adult Roma population.
- There is very limited knowledge of English amongst Roma communities in the UK.
- Roma find it very difficult to seek information using online platforms.
- Roma children lack access to equipment that would enable them to use online learning resources.

Roma find it difficult to understand the English instructions and information that the government is providing. Instead, they are relying on information from their country of origin. This information is often largely in conflict with the information and instructions

⁵ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/27/councils-told-to-house-all-rough-sleepers-in-england-by-weekend>

⁶ <https://www.bigissue.com/support-the-big-issue/>

provided by the UK government. **We believe that if provision is not made to better inform UK Roma communities, people could be put at enhanced risk through following incorrect advice. Limited English and IT skills will prevent many for accessing support made available by the government in this context. Education of Roma children is at risk.** The educational inequalities that Roma children face in the UK are likely to deepen should support not be put in place to address these concerns.

f) Culture and faith

- The Roma family unit usually includes extended family members; in most cases this includes grandparents as well.
- Roma tend to be religious. In the UK we have seen increasing numbers of Roma join the Jehovah's Witnesses and Pentecostal churches with community leaders organising their own congregations.

Adhering to self-isolation measures and protecting vulnerable family members will be more difficult for Roma families. Given the limited levels of English in the community, we are concerned that religious groups are not properly informing their congregations about social distancing and self-isolation.

g) **Pre-existing poverty**

- Many of the UK's Roma residents were already in poverty before the COVID 19 outbreak.
- Many of those in poverty had difficulties in accessing support available for them.

Although we acknowledge and appreciate everyone's efforts to respond to the current crisis, attention must be given to those continuing to face poverty.

The Roma Support Group calls on local authorities and other organisations to reflect in their approach to the COVID-19 outbreak the disproportionate and urgent vulnerabilities that Roma communities in the UK face.

- 1) We call on local authorities to make all necessary efforts to ensure that those who cannot afford to pay their rent due to loss of income are not evicted. This might involve **disseminating accessible information** on statutory tenancy rights, providing financial assistance or freezing rent payments. Equally, efforts should be made to ensure that those who will need to access local housing services have appropriate digital and language support available.
- 2) We call on local authorities to ensure that all **COVID-19 related information is provided** through channels and **in languages that Roma can access**. This should involve working with local charities, Roma activists and professionals.
- 3) We ask that authorities **to ensure that all those financially affected by the outbreak have appropriate support to access the government financial measures**. In each case, **support** should be made available **for those having difficulties using digital platforms or the English language**.

- 4) We ask for local authorities in areas where there is a Roma presence **to develop plans** on how **to engage and support Roma communities** with regard to the wide-ranging effects of the outbreak.
- 5) We **recommend** all local authorities that have large Roma populations in their areas to consider **reviewing the government's "70 years old" policy** on self-isolation and propose a lower age threshold.
- 6) We urge local authorities to apply to the [emergency support for rough sleepers during the coronavirus outbreak fund](#) to ensure support will be in places for the rough sleeping Roma in their localities.
- 7) We call on local authorities to ensure that Roma migrants who are not registered with a GP understand how to obtain prompt medical care and advice if they are concerned about COVID-19.
- 8) We call on local authorities to make efforts to provide resources and support to ensure Roma pupils can access online learning facilities.

This letter is supported by:
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For further information or questions please contact Mihai Calin Bica, Campaigning and Policy worker at mihai@romasupportgroup.org.uk

Yours Faithfully,



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