

# Supporting people from the Roma Community who are rough sleeping



This document summarises initial learning from a year of providing practical support to people from the Roma community who are rough sleeping.

It is based on the experiences of the Roma Rough Sleeper Team which operated as a pilot between January and December 2021 with funding from the Greater London Authority (GLA) and the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (DLUHC). It also captures learning from the Pan London Operational group which met monthly during this period to discuss the challenges and opportunities that emerged when working with Roma rough sleepers.

## Recognising the role and impact of racism and discrimination

Roma people have a long history of living in Europe and are recognised as one of the EU's largest minority groups. It is estimated that there are more than 10 million Roma individuals across Europe. Sadly the Roma community has experienced widespread racism over many centuries and this still continues today.

When supporting Roma individuals it's critical to recognise their personal experiences of racism as well as the impact of being part of a community that has been discriminated against for many generations.

Our role as homelessness professionals is always to **recognise** and **challenge** discrimination whilst respecting the wishes of each individual.

We have a crucial role to play in promoting equal access to services so individuals can get the culturally competent support they need to continue to recover from homelessness and move away from rough sleeping for good.

- **Roma mediators enable equal access to services. They should be from the Roma community themselves or with significant experience of Roma culture.**

## 1. Promote understanding

The Roma community has a rich and diverse culture and it is very helpful for homelessness professionals to attend training to better understand cultural norms and traditions.

It is also important to understand why many Roma people travel to the UK. Often they are experiencing extreme poverty at home without proper access to accommodation or healthcare. Many people from the Roma community also experience significant racism and discrimination in their home countries.

Individuals from the Roma community will often not be familiar with the role of outreach, or understand many of the systems and processes in the UK. It is really important to explain your role simply and avoid using acronyms or technical terms.

- **Book your team on training with the Roma Rough Sleeping Team.**

## 2. Communication

Many Roma people rough sleeping in London are Romanian Roma but over half speak Romany rather than Romanian and may struggle to understand Romanian translators.

A large number of the individuals worked with on the pilot project did not read or write in Romany and so written material should be avoided.

- **If you have to use a Romanian interpreter, check the client understands correctly and they are not distressed by the process.**

### 3. Assessing need

Many people have had poor experiences when engaging with services and are distrustful and fearful of institutions. It's important to recognise this and take time to build trust by:

- using personalisation budgets to meet the client's immediate needs e.g. food and clothing;
- offering the option of a female worker; and
- completing assessments a bit at a time.

→ **Do not over promise and only commit to something if you are sure you can follow through with it.**

### 4. Working with families or large groups

Many Roma people rough sleep in hotspot areas with their families, extended families or people from the same area. However, not all individuals sleeping in the same location will necessarily be related. It's important to remember that these are important safety networks for Roma people.

When supporting individuals at a hotspot location it is important to talk first with the person who presents themselves as speaking on behalf of the group. Once you have this person's trust it will be easier to speak to others.

It is important to be aware of confidentiality when speaking with your clients. You should be aware of the dynamics within the group and not say anything that puts others at risk. At the same time talking to individuals separately may cause distrust so you should manage the situation carefully and go slowly so that you earn the trust of everyone at the location.

→ **It is helpful to have multiple staff attending a hotspot at one time so you can more easily talk to as many people as possible.**

### 5. Access to healthcare

Healthcare can be an important way to build engagement and trust. Once an individual is engaging with healthcare they are more likely to engage with support in other areas.

The pilot project has shown that Roma people who are sleeping rough tend to have very high healthcare needs, particularly those who are older in age. Therefore rapid access to a GP is essential.

There is likely to be significant distrust of healthcare services and/or misinformation. It is important that individuals are supported to attend appointments through:

- gender appropriate healthcare requested in advance; and
- specific times when individuals from the Roma community can access a more personalised service, in a quieter space, with longer appointment times.

There can be significant stigma around mental health in the Roma community and this should be treated sensitively with joint working between a Roma Mediator and mental health professional.

**Contact the Roma Rough Sleeping Team for more detail on the Roma Clinic which they ran in Westminster in collaboration with Great Chapel Street Medical Centre.**

### 6. Immigration Advice

Individuals should have access to culturally competent immigration advice so they understand their rights and entitlements in the UK and can make informed decisions about their future.

Individuals may be unfamiliar and daunted by the process of accessing immigration advice so they should be supported to attend appointments by a Roma Mediator. Where possible, advice should be delivered 'in person' and at a safe and confidential location as close as possible to where they are staying.

### 7. Safety and Wellbeing

As with all people who are rough sleeping you should be alert to potential safeguarding concerns. In particular you should be alert to people who:

- are pregnant;
- may be under the age of 18;
- may be experiencing domestic violence or abuse; or
- may have been or are currently experiencing trafficking.

→ **Domestic abuse is not a trait of Roma culture but you should always be alert to potential abuse of power and follow local safeguarding procedures.**

You may wish to contact the Roma Rough Sleeping Team who can offer advice on facilitating culturally competent engagement between statutory services and the individual at risk.

## 8. Assessment and Move on Planning

All individuals should have a viable move on plan that takes into account:

- their right and entitlements;
- an assessment of need; and
- their ambitions for the future.

The pilot project has shown that individuals sometimes move between boroughs. Consequently it is important to set up joint working arrangements with neighboring teams. CHAIN can build bespoke reports to help with this.

As with other clients who have experienced trauma, assessments may be conducted over multiple meetings and you should always explain why you are asking each question to avoid the process feeling overly invasive.

As part of the assessment process you should identify whether the individual is potentially eligible to support under the Care Act and if they should be assessed by the relevant Local Authority.

International reconnections for Roma individuals should always be to safe accommodation where there is no risk of further rough sleeping, even if that were to take place in the person's home country.

As a result, facilitating reconnections can be complex and will often require the help of agencies supporting the Roma community in the country they are being reconnected to. The individual should be referred to a specialist Reconnection service such as Routes Home on [routesromereferrals@mungos.org](mailto:routesromereferrals@mungos.org) who can work to ensure safe access to accommodation, healthcare and other support services.

Like most migrants to the UK, individuals may wish to return home from time to time, especially for Christmas. The decision to support an individual to return home for a short period should be made on a case by case basis. The implications of leaving the country should be clearly explained including what the consequences would be for their support plan, benefits, accommodation and immigration situation.

Supporting an individual to return home for a short period should not be considered a reconnection.

## 9. Access to Emergency accommodation

The needs of the Roma community should be considered during Local Authority planning meetings about Emergency Accommodation.

Accommodation should be able to cater for couples and larger family groups who would like to stay in the same unit.

There should be adequate supported provision to safely accommodate individuals with support needs and those where there is risk of domestic violence.

People are much more likely to accept accommodation if it is in the borough in which they are rough sleeping and if it's part of an 'In for Good' offer with support around move on and links to services that support their recovery.

They are less likely to accept if it is for a short number of nights after which they will be asked to leave.

It is important to prepare staff to welcome Roma individuals. They will need to be prepared to:

- manage the booking in process in a safe way for people arriving in a large group; and
- clearly explain verbally and in the appropriate language, the booking process, the expectations for living in the accommodation, the health and safety process and how to access support.

## 10. Ending homelessness for good

The pilot project demonstrated that it is possible to support people from the Roma community to access and sustain long term accommodation but that intensive floating support is required at the outset.

This support should include helping people to understand the systems and expectations they need to engage with to sustain a tenancy.

Culturally competent employment support as well as intensive English as a second language (ESOL) lessons are also crucial to support people in their recovery from homelessness.

**For more information contact:**  
[romaroughsleepingteam@mungos.org](mailto:romaroughsleepingteam@mungos.org)