



HOUSE OF COMMONS

Lord Greenhalgh
Minister of State, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government

By email

16 May 2020

Re: Addressing the needs of Roma communities during Covid-19

Dear Stephen

We write as officers of the All Party Parliamentary Group on Gypsies, Travellers and Roma in relation to the concerns of Roma communities during the Covid-19 crisis. We previously wrote to the Department to identify some of the challenges faced by Gypsies and Travellers living in caravans but this letter identifies the particular challenges faced by Roma, most of whom do not live in caravans.

There are approximately 200,000-300,000 migrant Roma living in the UK, many of which face multiple disadvantages which make them disproportionately vulnerable to Covid-19. We urge the Government make an assessment of this and put mitigating measures in place to protect vulnerable Roma communities.

This concern is shared by the Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner, who said in a statement on 7 April;

'Every year, on the occasion of International Roma Day, governments are reminded of the need to improve the living conditions of the many impoverished and marginalised Roma in Europe and step up measures to combat the discrimination they face. This call should resonate even more loudly this year, as Roma people living in substandard housing and in segregated settlements across Europe are among the groups most vulnerable to the current COVID-19 pandemic.'

'I urge governments to issue and implement crisis plans which ensure that Roma and Travellers benefit from the same level of information as others .. in order to be prepared to cope with the pandemic.'

In terms of health, Roma have a shorter life expectancy than the general population, between 7-20 years lower across European countries, and suffer with higher instances of chronic illnesses with conditions such as include asthma, heart disease and obesity which puts them at greater risk of serious illness and death from Covid-19.

The Government has acknowledged that a disproportionate number of people from ethnic minority backgrounds are dying with coronavirus, and Roma are very likely to be within that group. Data released in the Republic of Ireland at the end of last week found 43% of Traveller people tested and 58% of Roma people tested had positive results for coronavirus, in contrast with 4% of the general population of Ireland. The Irish Government have taken the proactive approach of establishing a new hub in Dublin Hospital, which includes a mobile unit to test and treat marginalised groups, delivering test results in under an hour.

The situation is likely to be the same in the UK, and by way of example, Idea Rom Association, a Nottingham-based Roma organisation, reports that about 40 of the 400 Roma they're working with have been infected or had symptoms.

Despite these alarming figures, we understand that the Public Health England Review into BME Covid-19 deaths is focussing on data sets which do not include Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities or do not collect a sufficient amount of data in order to allow a meaningful analysis. Without new data collection, the Government will not have the information it needs to be able to identify and respond to transmission within Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. We would be keen to hear if you have considered the immediate introduction of ethnicity monitoring in coroner's death reports using ONS 2021 Census Ethnicity Categories. We would also be keen to hear if you have considered collecting information on ethnicity as part of Covid-19 testing, again, using the ONS 2021 Census Ethnicity Categories.

As well as the risks to health and life, we would also like to draw your attention to some of the areas which Roma communities are likely to be adversely affected by Covid-19. Many Roma are already living in extreme poverty which is likely to increase during the pandemic due to loss of employment, particularly from casual or zero hour contracts. We are concerned that many Roma will not access the Government's support package for those who have lost work due to Covid-19, due to limited online facilities and language barriers.

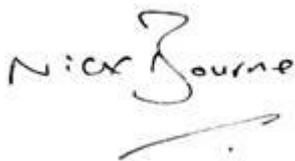
We are also concerned about the inevitable knock on effect this financial insecurity will have on people's accommodation situation. High numbers of Roma live in insecure housing without contracts and are less likely to be aware of the rights around protection from eviction. There are already a significant number of Roma who are street homeless and there is a real danger these figures will increase during the outbreak.

There will also be a disproportionate impact of school closures on the education of Roma children, who already experience some of the poorest educational outcomes of any ethnic group. Many Roma families will lack access to equipment that would enable them to use online learning resources to continue their education during the outbreak. The Roma Education fund expect that the already high dropout rate for Roma pupils across Europe (68%) will increase due to the barriers to distance learning during the outbreak.

In April 2019, Women and Equalities Committee Chair Maria Miller said, 'Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people have been comprehensively failed by policy makers and public services for far too long'. We were very encouraged by your letter to local authorities highlighting the challenges faced by Gypsies and Travellers living on roadside camps, but more needs to be done to assess and react to the impact the coronavirus pandemic will have on Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities. Therefore, we are asking for your Department to urgently respond to the following requests:

- Will the Government set up task forces to assess and address the challenges faced by both Gypsy and Traveller communities and Roma communities, on the lines of the task force for rough sleepers spearheaded by Dame Louise Casey?
- Will the Government ensure that the Public Health England Review into BME Covid-19 deaths includes effective data collection for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities, so that a meaningful inclusive analysis can be conducted?

Yours sincerely



Lord Bourne
Honorary President, All-Party Parliamentary Group for Gypsies Travellers and Roma



Baroness Whitaker and Kate Green MP
Co-Chairs, All-Party Parliamentary Group for Gypsies Travellers and Roma