

Article

Lived experiences of Roma people in England and Wales: 2025

Explores experiences of Roma people in England and Wales, including migration and settlement in the UK, access to services, identities and sense of belonging.

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Release date:
22 September 2026

Next release:
To be announced

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1 . Main points

- People identifying as ethnically Roma in England and Wales are from a range of backgrounds, including those who have migrated from other European countries and those born in the UK.
- Non-UK-born participants widely reported ethnic discrimination in countries of origin as an important driver of migration, alongside histories of persecution and intergenerational trauma, which influenced identities, perceptions of safety and trust in public services.
- Non-UK-born participants frequently described feeling welcome in the UK, although some participants across the wider sample also described experiences of discrimination and stereotyping linked to their ethnicity and other aspects of identity, including nationality.
- Both UK- and non-UK-born participants found that the public in England and Wales had limited awareness of Roma as a distinct ethnic group; this allowed individuals to choose whether to disclose their identity depending on how safe they felt, but also created barriers to effective service provision.
- Participants made suggestions for improving Roma engagement with public services, including educating service providers about Roma heritage, experiences of discrimination and specific needs, improving representation of Roma in public institutions, increasing digital and language skills within Roma communities, and developing a National Roma Strategy.
- Limited availability of data on Roma populations in the UK was identified as a fundamental barrier to informed service provision, with participants noting that Roma ethnicity categories were not consistently available in data collection and that concerns about discrimination also led to reluctance to disclose their identity.
- Celebrating Roma music, dance, food and other expressions of identity was widely seen as a way to foster curiosity about Roma population, encourage dialogue and build bridges with other, non-Roma communities.

A brief [video showing our main findings](#) is also available in English and in five variants of Romanes.

2 . Overview of our research into Roma experiences

Roma in Europe and the UK

Roma have resided in Europe for over six centuries, settling across the continent, as noted in the Council of Europe's [Protecting the rights of Roma publication](#). The term "Roma" encompasses different population groups, with multiple traditions, beliefs and experiences that are influenced by the wider socio-political contexts of the countries where they live. The term was endorsed during the first [World Romani Congress in 1971](#), which also established the Roma anthem and flag. Some Roma speak one of several variants of the Roma language, Romanes, in addition to the language(s) of the countries where they live.

Both historically and contemporarily, Roma have been referred to by some as "Gypsies". For those who identify as ethnically Roma, having their ethnicity misidentified as "Gypsy" can be offensive. This can be exacerbated by the term "Gypsy" sometimes being used in derogatory ways, according to the [European Network Against Racism](#).

While the history of migration of Roma to the UK is complex, most migrated following the 2004 and 2007 EU accessions, with some also having sought asylum in the 1990s, according to the [Roma Support Group](#). Over 103,000 people in England and Wales identified as Roma in [Census 2021](#). However, there are suggestions that the actual number may be considerably higher, as noted in the Traveller Movement's [Briefing on Census 2021 for Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people](#). Recent [census data from Scotland](#) and [census data from Northern Ireland](#) report 3,218 and 1,529 individuals identifying as Roma, respectively. The National Records of Scotland has also identified issues with ethnicity reporting, noting in its [Quality Assurance report on population estimates and ethnic group](#) that some individuals born in Rome, Italy, may have mistakenly selected the Roma category.

Roma have experienced a history of persecution spanning several centuries. For example, this includes over 500 years of slavery in Romanian territories (read more in the Ian F Hancock's book, [We are the Romani People](#)), extermination during the Holocaust known as "Porrajmos" (read more in Holocaust Memorial Day Trust's [The Roma Genocide](#)), forced sterilisation and segregated education (read more in Ryan Powell and Huub van Baar's [The Invisibilization of Anti-Roma Racisms](#)). The Council of Europe has published [evidence that Roma continue to experience discrimination and antigypsyism](#).

Evidence from both the UK (read more in Office for Health Improvement and Disparities' guidance for [Improving Roma health](#)) and Europe (read more in European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights' report on [Perspectives from the Roma Survey 2024](#)) indicates that Roma communities experience lower life expectancy and disproportionately negative outcomes across multiple areas, including employment, health, education and housing. There is also evidence that outcomes can vary for different national groups. For example, Slovak and Romanian Roma were more likely to report overcrowding in Census 2021.

Gypsy, Roma, Traveller (GRT) umbrella term

In the UK policy context, Roma are often grouped together with those identifying as Gypsy or Traveller under a combined "Gypsy/Roma/Traveller" ethnic group category. The groups are sometimes mistaken as a single ethnic group by the public, according to GOV.UK's [Ethnicity facts and figures](#). Despite this, it is widely acknowledged that each of these groups has different needs and challenges, with the experiences of many Roma shaped by migration and pre-migration experiences in their countries of origin (see Migration Yorkshire's [National Roma Network 2015 to 2017 report](#)). Furthermore, most Roma in the UK and the EU live in fixed accommodation and have settled lifestyles, as highlighted by James in [Criminalising Gypsies, Roma and Travellers in the UK](#).

Limitations in ethnicity data

In 2019, the Women and Equalities Committee's [report on inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities](#) highlighted the need for better data relating to these groups. Recent censuses across the UK were the first to include a separate "Roma" tick box. The Government Statistical Service is currently [reviewing how ethnicity data are collected across the public sector](#), with plans to publish the new standard by the end of 2026. In response to the review, a [briefing paper drawing on perspectives from civil society organisations and academics \(PDF, 4.3MB\)](#) highlighted the importance of disaggregated ethnicity data.

Despite the improving classification and data standards, challenges in achieving accurate representation persist. Individuals may mistrust the reasons behind data collection and choose not to self-identify. Additionally, small response rates or sample sizes can require Roma data to be aggregated with other ethnic groups to reduce disclosure risk and enable analysis. Aggregation is sometimes necessary to enable alignment between different data sources. This can mask the differences between groups and influence how their experiences are interpreted.

This study

In 2021, the [Inclusive Data Taskforce \(IDTF\) published a report](#) that included recommendations for improving inclusivity of UK data and evidence. The National Statistician published a [response to the IDTF report](#), committing to strengthening the UK data infrastructure and to expanding methods for understanding the lived experiences of underrepresented groups. Among these, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities were prioritised, having been identified by the IDTF as some of the most underrepresented groups.

To take this forward, in 2022 the Office for National Statistics (ONS) conducted a [study exploring Gypsies' and Travellers' lived experiences](#). Following input from the study's advisory group, it was agreed that Roma experiences should be explored through a separate research project, recognising their distinct identities, experiences and needs. The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma also requested evidence on Roma lived experiences.

This research is supported by several government departments, including the Department for Health and Social Care, Department for Education, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, UK Health Security Agency, Cabinet Office, Home Office, and Welsh Government. These stakeholders expressed interest in understanding how lived experiences of Roma shape their outcomes across different areas of life. They were also interested in exploring experiences of interactions with services, with a view to generating insights that may be relevant to policy considerations. Representatives of these departments participated in focus groups with Roma participants and provided regular input on policy context, stakeholder engagement and areas of interest as part of the cross-government advisory group.

This research explores the lived experiences of Roma people in England and Wales, focusing on identity, migration, needs, and interactions with services and institutions, including education, housing, healthcare and employment. The selection of topics was informed by:

- engagement with representatives from Roma communities, university researchers, civil society organisations (CSOs), and colleagues from other government departments
- a review of existing evidence on Roma people's experiences in the UK and Europe
- our previous research with Gypsies and Travellers to enable comparisons of experiences, given the frequent aggregation of these groups in data and policy contexts

While Roma in England and Wales may share some experiences with other groups, such as those identifying as Gypsies or Travellers, or non-Roma migrants, the findings of this research highlight how these experiences combine in distinctive ways with Roma pre-migration experiences and other factors to shape Roma identity, lived experience and needs.

The topics were explored through 63 in-depth interviews, using semi-structured topic guides to allow participants to raise additional priorities. The research also included 19 interviews with key informants from organisations and services working with Roma, and five focus groups with Roma participants, service providers, researchers and local and central government.

We adopted a peer research approach for interviews with Roma participants, as detailed in [Section 10: Methodology](#). To reflect the diversity within the Roma communities, the sample consisted of Roma individuals living in five locations across England and Wales, who had either migrated to, or were born in, the UK. Non-UK-born participants originated from six different countries and represent a wide range of educational, employment, and migration backgrounds. Further details of the achieved sample can be found in our [accompanying dataset](#).

All names used in the report are pseudonyms. Quotations from focus groups and key informant interviews do not include information on participants' characteristics, as this was not collected.

Translation and our use of terminology

Interviews with participants were conducted in their preferred languages. Where interviews were held in languages other than English, they were subsequently translated into English by Roma peer researchers. Several quotations included in this report feature participants referring to themselves as "Gypsies". In most cases, this reflects a literal translation of the words "igan" (Romanian) or "cigán" (Slovak), or the equivalent in other languages, rather than referring to the ethnic group of Romani Gypsies, distinct from Roma. However, as the intended meaning of the speaker is not always clear, for consistency and in keeping with our policy for the reporting of ethnic groups, we have capitalised "Gypsy" throughout. As discussed later in this report, while the term "Gypsy" is sometimes used within Roma communities in interpersonal contexts, it is widely considered offensive when used by individuals outside the communities, or as a conflation of different ethnic groups.

3 . Experiences of arriving and settling in England and Wales

Participants reflected on their settlement in the UK, sharing their motivations for migration and the challenges of establishing stability in a new country. While some challenges appeared similar to those documented among other migrant groups, participants consistently emphasised experiences of discrimination prior to migration, which were seen as having a lasting influence on their expectations and experiences of life in the UK.

About the participant sample

Participants' circumstances on arriving in the UK varied. A small number were second-generation migrants born in the UK, while most arrived either before the age of 13 years, or between the ages of 20 and 29 years. Smaller numbers migrated during adolescence or later in life up to their mid-50s.

The sample included participants from the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, and Hungary. Romanian and Bulgarian nationals were typically the most recent arrivals, with most having lived in the UK for less than 10 years. Hungarian participants appeared more established, often living in the UK for close to 10 years or more. Slovak nationals, the largest group in the sample, had been in the UK between 6 and 27 years, suggesting ongoing migration over time. Czech, and particularly Polish participants, were generally more consistently established, having typically migrated more than 15 and 20 years ago, respectively.

These patterns reflect the timing of EU accessions. Poland, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Hungary joined in 2004, with their nationals granted immediate rights to live and work in the UK. Romania and Bulgaria joined in 2007 but faced labour market restrictions until 2014. A small number of Polish and Slovak participants arrived before 2004, seeking asylum from persecution, which reflects wider migration trends.

Experiences before migrating to the UK

Participants described both positive memories of life before migrating to the UK and more challenging experiences of discrimination and limited opportunities linked to their Roma ethnicity. These experiences were seen as important drivers of migration, shaping participants' aspirations for life in the UK. They included experiences of public institutions as untrustworthy, shaping similar expectations of institutions in the UK.

Cherished aspects of their lives before moving to the UK included memories of childhood and youth, country life, family gatherings, and a strong sense of community.

I enjoyed where we lived in the village, it was a simple lifestyle... Before I had my children, I would go out with my cousins and stay up all night. We would prepare the fire... they would bring their guitar with them, and we would stay up all night singing, dancing, talking, eating... these were the best times... Even when I had my kids, I didn't really have to worry... someone was always in the house watching them.

(Monika, Slovakian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Some gave examples of their families' positive interactions with people who were not Roma, including in schools, neighbourhoods and through church.

[My mum] became more friendly with [non-Roma] Romanians because of the church, she met many good, good people, who did not discriminate her being just Roma. They saw her... as a human being and supported her.

(Elena, Romanian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Despite these positive memories, participants' accounts were dominated by difficult experiences, particularly discrimination, abuse and historical persecution. Memories of Holocaust were still present within families and continued to shape identity and trust across generations.

I was feeling a stranger in my school back in Romania... my parents... asked me to hide my identity... to not be discriminated... I was thinking that something was wrong with me... I understand now, it was only because it was legacy; passing generation by generation in my family... because of fear of persecution, because they were part of the Holocaust deportation in Romania... because they wanted to protect me.

(Ana, Romanian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Participants reported contemporary, firsthand experiences of physical threats, hostility, social exclusion, stereotyping and criminalisation linked to their Roma ethnicity in countries of origin.

You get on a tram, and there is a sign there; 'no Gypsies on this tram'... The sign was written by people, on paper, and put behind the plastic and screwed on so the driver must have seen it.

(Xena, Czech Roma female, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

People didn't really want us there. When they drank, they'd come up to the house and throw stones at it.

(Ryszard, Polish Roma male, aged 60 to 69 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

In Romania, being an adult and walking on the street one day... I had the mom in front of me with a little child, saying to him, 'come close to me, come close to me. If not, the Roma will come to steal you'.

(Elena, Romanian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Participants noted that individuals with darker skin were at greater risk of discrimination, as they were more easily identified as Roma in contexts with strong anti-Roma sentiment and broader racist attitudes. Some highlighted that other minoritised groups also experienced discrimination, with limited ethnic diversity in countries of origin seen to aggravate these risks.

Back in Romania, it was the conflict of skin colour... I'm different, I'm 100% different. Because of the skin colour, because of, just physically wise, I'm different... I'm a few shades darker... People would know 100% that I'm something else, I'm Roma.

(Alina, Romanian Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Institutional discrimination was widely reported. While some Bulgarian and Hungarian participants described supportive school environments, the dominant narrative centred on low expectations from teachers and limited opportunities. Slovak, Czech, and Romanian participants sometimes referred to placement in separate Roma classes or exclusion from mainstream schools.

In school in Slovakia, you would see a class full of Roma children and the teachers would have a horrible attitude.

(Ingrid, Slovakian Roma female, aged 20 to 29 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

My mother tried to enrol me into school, just because on my papers it said that I was Roma, the principal was like – I'm not having that into my school, I don't want that in my school...

(Alina, Romanian Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

If you end up in a special school, you don't have much to choose from, only builder, cook, dress maker etc... just very basic. But they didn't even allow me to go to a normal school.

(Jakub, Czech Roma male, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Limited educational opportunities affected skills development and future employment prospects, with participants also reporting being denied jobs because of their Roma ethnicity, despite having relevant qualifications.

If you went to look for a job the reply would always be: "No, you are a Gypsy"... I was a qualified designer for painting and even having a qualification didn't help. They just didn't want anything to do with us.

(Andrej, Slovakian Roma male, aged 60 to 69 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Some also shared that job offers were withdrawn once their ethnicity became known.

I applied for jobs over the phone... She said: 'I've got space for you'... Over the phone, everything was okay. When she saw me, she didn't even look into my face... She looked over me... 'Sorry. We don't have any position for you here'.

(Xena, Czech Roma female, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Such experiences were more frequently recounted by participants who migrated as adults or adolescents. However, younger participants, who migrated in early childhood or were born in the UK, sometimes referred to family stories that continued to shape their perceptions.

I heard tons of stories. The police, how unfair they are to the Roma, how the people are racist towards each other, how hard it is to get a job there, because, you know, Gadjó [non-Roma], how they treat you. I've heard many stories, including from my parents, my friends' family. Everyone's told me how it is over there.

(Patrik, Slovakian Roma male, aged 14 to 19 years, UK born, participant interview)

Previous experiences of discrimination and limited opportunities were among the main factors that influenced people to migrate, and shaped hopes and aspirations for life in the UK. These included the need for safety and belonging, as well as better educational opportunities for children, and access to employment.

My biggest hope was that my son could go to school and feel like he belongs. In Slovakia, it was hard... I also hoped to find some work, to feel useful, to build a life. We didn't expect everything to be easy, but we hoped we'd be given a fair chance.

(Sofia, Slovakian Roma female, aged 20 to 29 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Experiences before migration were also seen to shape levels of trust in individuals and institutions in the UK, as illustrated by Pavol, a service provider whose mother was subjected to forced sterilisation. More information about this practice, which affected many Roma women in Slovakia until the early 2000s can be found in the [Body and Soul report published by the Centre for Reproductive Rights and Centre for Civil and Human Rights \(PDF, 997KB\)](#). Pavol described how the lasting trauma this left could influence willingness to seek medical help or engage with routine screening.

There's still that stigma with the doctors and attending appointments or having a letter. I mean, my mom had a letter where she had to go for smear test and my sister explained it to her. She was like – 'No way, I'm not letting the doctor go there ever again after what happened to me in Slovakia'.

(Pavol, Slovakian Roma key informant, education sector, key informant interview)

Journeys into and experiences of arrival in the UK

Participants shared what inspired their migration to the UK and discussed their beginnings in a new country, including impactful early memories of both positive and difficult encounters.

Participants commonly reported that migration to the UK was enabled by relatives or friends who had migrated earlier, often providing invitations and sharing positive accounts of work and education opportunities. This reflects established evidence on the importance of social networks for migrant groups (read more in Bilecen and Lubbers' 2021 article, [The networked character of migration and transnationalism](#)).

My sister helped me. She invited me here and told me there was work available at a factory.

(Carmen, Romanian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

My family that lives here told me to stay and bring the kids. They said that it will be better for me and the kids. I will start working and the kids will go to school.

(Lucie, Czech Roma female, 50 to 59 years, living in the UK between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Participants with dependants adopted different migration strategies, with some moving to the UK together as a family, while others migrated alone first to establish stability, and then brought relatives later. Periods of separation were seen to affect well-being and increase the stress of settling in a new country.

My wife used to call me and asked me to come home. I told her no... I said that we will suffer through this somehow, until we make it... Then we had our jobs... And we called our families to come over. My wife and kids came, and the life was better.

(Johnny, Czech Roma male, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

Participants widely described feeling both nervous and excited on arrival in the UK. Early interactions with individuals in the UK often formed important memories and varied from welcoming acts of kindness to more mixed experiences.

Our first day was very, very exciting, because there were new things that we hadn't seen... there were people smiling... I remember that we had a neighbour next door who would come out and see us and say: 'How are you?', she would offer us sweets, and I was very pleased with how she was...

(Dorin, Romanian Roma male, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Others had memories of more difficult beginnings. Cristina, who moved to the UK in early childhood, recalled her family's first visit to a local shop. The cashier and other customers became frustrated with her parents' struggle to communicate in English, and some laughed at them. The memory of how the event influenced her self-esteem was still vivid, several years later.

It made me feel insecure... It just made me feel very bad about myself. In my head, I was like – 'why are people so judgemental, it is a new experience for me, it is really hard for me. It is the first day and... I don't know how to speak or what to do'.

(Cristina, Romanian Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Some participants returned to their countries for extended periods because of caring responsibilities or medical treatment before returning to the UK. Participants also maintained transnational connections through family visits, attending important events, providing financial support to relatives, or continuing to own properties in their country of origin.

Building stability in the UK

Experiences of settling in, including finding housing, employment and navigating a new environment, varied widely and were shaped in part by access to resources, particularly social networks and educational opportunities in their countries of origin. This is illustrated through the following case studies, which present contrasting experiences of Janos and Johnny.

As a child, Janos was competitive, which pushed him to do well at school. Even so, he expected to start working with his uncle after primary school, just as his cousins had done. His teacher saw Janos' potential and, after gaining support from his parents, filled in a secondary school application for him, telling him simply – 'Sign it, you need to study'.

In his next school, Janos met another supportive teacher who insisted he go to university. Janos completed his degree, supported by an external organisation that worked with young Roma in higher education.

After finishing his studies, Janos moved to the UK with his wife, helped by siblings who already lived here. He picked up a few odd jobs at first, found a place to rent and few months later secured a professional role, steadily developing his career over the past few years.

(Janos, Hungarian Roma male, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less)

Johnny went to a special school, like most Roma children in his town. He was eager to learn, but teachers treated him like he wasn't capable of much and offered little support. After finishing school, there didn't seem to be many choices open to him, so he decided to train as a construction worker.

Life wasn't easy, with little work and stability, so when his family member suggested they try their luck in the UK, Johnny didn't hesitate. They arrived in the UK and stayed with a relative who advised them to go to a job agency. Using a mix of hand gestures and a few phrases they learnt in English, they managed to get work in a factory.

But then, Johnny's relative said she couldn't house him anymore. With nowhere to go, he ended up squatting in an empty flat without electricity. One day, the landlord walked in. To Johnny's surprise, he agreed for him to stay there for small rent and brought a contract. Feeling they had already been apart for too long, Johnny decided his wife and children could now join him.

After that, things weren't always simple, sometimes there was no work, but over time Johnny felt life becoming easier. He moved house a few times, his children finished school, and he feels that the UK is his home now.

(Johnny, Czech Roma male, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for over 20 years)

Support of relatives and friends played an essential role in obtaining housing in the early days in the UK. Some, like Janos, were able to secure sufficient income and move into independent living arrangements promptly. For others, gathering funds and appropriate documentation was a longer process. Staying with extended family could be insecure, as in Johnny's case, and was often associated with limited privacy and, sometimes, overcrowding, influencing overall well-being.

There were so many of us [in my uncle's house] at one point, we would all sleep next to each other... so it wasn't easy... but they helped us lot.

(Jana, Slovakian Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

That move [from my relative's house into our own flat] felt like freedom. I finally had my own space. I could breathe. My son had his own bed. It made a big difference to our mental health.

(Sofia, Slovakian Roma female, aged 20 to 29 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Experiences after finding their own accommodation varied, with some expressing satisfaction with the quality of housing, and others reporting challenges such as sub-optimal living conditions. These included mould, pests, and lack of furniture. While these experiences are not unique to Roma, they are highlighted here because poor living conditions, especially among those facing multiple disadvantages, may further undermine people's health and well-being.

Dampness is dangerous for people... I have a husband who has diabetes and suffers from various chronic conditions, like lung problems, and all that made things worse. The dampness was really bad.

(Beata, Polish Roma female, aged 50 to 59 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

A few participants reported being exploited by untrustworthy agents who collected rent without passing it on to landlords, creating precarious situations that sometimes resulted in families being wrongfully evicted with little or no notice.

We were paying the agent, but the agent wasn't paying the landlords. And everything started from there, and at the end, when they kicked us out from the house... we were homeless for a week. And when we found this house, they contacted us, [to say] it was a misunderstanding.

(Elsa, Bulgarian Roma female, aged 20 to 29 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Most participants appeared to achieve housing stability over time. However, some, particularly among those with shorter residence in the UK, continued to face challenges. These were linked to housing affordability in the context of the wider housing crisis, as well as difficulties navigating access to social housing linked to other barriers in accessing services. Additional challenges emerged for individuals who travelled to their countries of origin for extended periods, as gaps in required evidence made accessing housing difficult.

In cases like ours, when people leave the country for different reasons, like pandemic, health problems, some serious reasons – when they come back it is difficult to give these proofs and evidence of their incomes, so it is almost impossible to rent a house.

(Milena, Bulgarian Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

A small number of participants secured stable employment before or soon after arriving in the UK, but most initially took less secure, entry-level roles, often in manufacturing, construction, cleaning or hospitality. This was frequently arranged via agencies and on zero-hours contracts, contributing to job insecurity and, at times, pressure to accept unsafe working conditions that could affect long-term health.

I was too exhausted. My strength left me, and I fell to the ground. [I spent a few months in a hospital after that]. I was working too much. When they have noticed I can do so much, they were sending me to every section like packing and stuff. And when they put you there you get so tired... I just came and I needed this job. We didn't have our own place or nothing.

(Janek, Slovakian Roma male, aged 60 to 69 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

The job at the building site was really hard. We had to carry bricks and heavy loads of 300kg. You have to carry all that weight on your back. And from that, even now, I have high blood pressure... or from eating unhealthy food, because you don't have time, so you have to eat it quick.

(Johnny, Czech Roma male, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

Similar associations between poor housing and employment conditions and adverse health outcomes have also been reported among Gypsies and Travellers, as shown in our [Gypsies' and Travellers' lived experiences, health, England and Wales: 2022 bulletin](#). However, for Roma participants who were not born in the UK, migration experiences and language barriers were sometimes reported as aggravating precarity in navigating employment and housing.

Early settlement was often marked by challenges in navigating unfamiliar systems, such as registering with doctors or accessing schooling, with those lacking support from family or friends sometimes experiencing delays in accessing essential services.

For a good one year, half year, I would say I [didn't go to school] ... We didn't know anyone. We didn't know anything. We didn't have anybody around us who could show us what to do, how to do, where to start from, the life, in a different country.

(Elsa, Bulgarian Roma female, aged 20 to 29 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Experiences with the UK immigration system

The changes in immigration regulations following Brexit required EU migrants already resident in the UK to take action to secure their immigration status. Explanation of the types of immigration status under the EU Settlement Scheme are provided in [Section 9: Glossary](#).

Participants described challenges in navigating the UK immigration system, including securing and evidencing their status, which affected daily life. These challenges can also be experienced by other migrant groups, as noted in Migration Observatory's [report on Migrants' experiences of the UK immigration system](#). However, key informants emphasised that limited literacy, often linked to previous educational exclusion, can further exacerbate these difficulties for some Roma individuals.

The UK's immigration system was described as complex, and at times confusing, particularly when evidencing continuous residence. In some families, services were routinely registered under men's names, inadvertently disadvantaging women when proof was required.

Many Roma just cannot get the status, even though they lived here for very long time. They just can't because... especially women, they can't provide evidence for five-year continuous living in the UK... even if they have a house; it'll be in their husband's name, contracts and everything in their name, bills, their name, you know, women aren't involved.

(Xena, Czech Roma female, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

These difficulties extended to those in more precarious circumstances. Key informants emphasised that the most vulnerable individuals, including those who were trafficked or working cash-in-hand, faced challenges when trying to gather evidence.

People that were human trafficked, they were brought here, they didn't have access to information, they were exploited in different low paid jobs and these people couldn't apply because they didn't have any employment, evidence, they weren't registered to GPs, they couldn't prove they were here.

(Ille, Romanian Roma key informant, voluntary sector, focus group)

I have an experience of an applicant who was working cash-in-hand, and he asked his employer to provide him with a letter to document that he's been working for him... There is no way those employers are going to be giving any documents, any letters for immigration purposes.

(Helena, Czech Roma key informant, voluntary sector, focus group)

Additional challenges related to the digitalisation of immigration processes. Age, socio-economic status or disability are among important factors influencing digital exclusion, according to the House of Lords Communications and Digital Committee's [report on Digital exclusion in the UK](#). Participants described difficulties using online systems, managing email communication, and accessing their accounts to ensure their information is up to date. Key informants described the same problem, adding that digital challenges can be compounded by limited access to devices and language barriers. Digitalisation was also seen as problematic in the context of limited functional literacy among some Roma, linked to experiences of educational exclusion before migration.

Some... they do not read. We have Roma adults without literacy; they do not read because no education background. Second point, how to use smartphone. Third, language barrier, even though they can read in Romanian, they don't know English.

(Elle, Romanian Roma key informant, voluntary sector, focus group)

Some participants described difficulties accessing trustworthy support, which could expose them to exploitation or incorrect advice, causing delays and negatively affecting their applications.

When [my husband] came... we applied for residency. But in the beginning, we didn't know English, we didn't know what an email was, we knew absolutely nothing. Then he asked other people to help him. Unfortunately, those people, probably didn't know either, and they made a false application, they gave false evidence. We didn't know.

(Andreea, Romanian Roma female, aged 20 to 29 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

There were also gaps in understanding how to move from pre-settled to settled status under the EU Settlement Scheme and the rights linked to each. Key informants noted similar knowledge gaps among some statutory service staff, such as around using share codes to verify status, which could affect access to services.

From my experience of working with local authorities and stakeholders, there's very limited knowledge of the share codes within services, so they cannot guide individuals on what they want exactly... So even when people are submitting the right thing, they're being told to submit something else and so people are getting confused.

(Justyna, non-Roma key informant, local government, focus group)

Without immigration status, individuals face barriers to accessing legal employment, housing, and healthcare. Key informants noted that challenges navigating the immigration system can push people into precarious situations, including debt and insecurity. Ille shared his experience of supporting a client in such circumstances:

She's entitled to apply for Settlement Scheme, she applied but she doesn't read emails in English so she couldn't provide evidence, applied a few times, now they've got a bill from NHS to pay for her birth, although the husband has pre-settlement, she doesn't... so now she needs to pay £11,000 for the birth at the hospital.

(Ille, Romanian Roma key informant, voluntary sector, focus group)

Improving accessibility of the immigration system

Participants and key informants shared their views on how access to services could be improved for Roma, as detailed in [Section 4: Navigating access to services in England and Wales](#). This took place in five focus groups, each exploring a different topic, and attended by representatives from Roma communities, key informants, service providers, and representatives from the relevant government departments. While many of the broader suggestions discussed in the focus groups were relevant to navigating the immigration system, key informants also shared ideas that focused specifically on easing engagement with it.

They described a need for simplified processes around evidencing residence and confirming immigration status. Suggestions included:

- exploring the potential of administrative data, such as NHS data, as a proof of continued residence
- accepting testimonies from trusted institutions, such as schools or GP surgeries, to evidence presence in the country
- exploring alternative ways of verifying immigration status, such as via passports or digital IDs

For example, Adrian suggested accepting testimony from schools as a trusted institution.

I think with mothers, for example, who don't have much evidence but they have been taking their children to school every day, if the school could confirm, 'Yeah, I've seen this mother'... maybe if the school has a template or something that can be used to make it very easy for the school to do it... I think parents would be able to do that and it wouldn't be too difficult for something like that to be obtained.

(Adrian, Romanian Roma key informant, voluntary sector, focus group)

Key informants also emphasised a need for improving understanding of the requirements for proving immigration status among public institutions. They suggested possible solutions, including, requiring public services to designate a "digital status" expert (suggested by Sophie, non-Roma key informant, local government).

Key informants valued the ongoing efforts to support the most vulnerable individuals by the Home Office Vulnerability Team and emphasised the importance of involving Roma grassroots organisations to improve reach and support trust.

Receiving and giving of support

Family and community networks were described as essential sources of support during settlement, with some participants also accessing help from councils, public services and civil society organisations (CSOs), including crisis support, advice on rights and guidance in navigating unfamiliar systems.

Getting involved in the community helped a lot. I attended meetings and yearly gatherings. They weren't just casual meetups. There were lawyers and professionals from various institutions who understood the system and explained everything... Within six months, I understood things like housing rights and policies. I started looking into it more seriously. What are your rights? What can you do? The CSO gave me a lot of knowledge.

(Dariusz, Polish Roma male, aged 60 to 69 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Gaining stability was often linked to a desire to give back to others. Many participants were involved in voluntary organisations, supporting both Roma and other communities. Elsa, an active volunteer, described helping others as a mission driving her choices and creating a strong sense of reward. Her own challenging experiences of settling in the UK provided her with understanding of needs and a motivation to support others in their journeys.

Yeah, I think that my school times, my secondary school days were the hardest days that made me become who am I now... I passed through this road, and I didn't have anybody to hold my hand and guide me. And when I see a person that's passing this road, I want to be the one who's holding their hand and guiding them.

(Elsa, Bulgarian Roma female, aged 20 to 29 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

4 . Navigating access to services in England and Wales

Participants and key informants highlighted a range of cross-cutting barriers that influenced access to services, such as:

- education
- housing
- health
- employment

Examples of barriers included:

- limited English proficiency among some Roma
- a lack of understanding of Roma history, cultural contexts, and needs among service providers

Key informants also described the limited data on Roma populations as a challenge to effective service provision. They identified the needs to:

- increase Roma representation in public institutions
- improve digital and administrative skills within Roma communities
- increase understanding of Roma experiences among service providers
- develop a National Roma Strategy similar to those used by EU member states

Language proficiency

English proficiency varied across participants. Of 63 interviews, 17 were conducted in English, with younger participants, who went to school in the UK, generally fluent, and adults reporting mixed ability. Barriers, including the cost of classes and immediate life pressures, limited opportunities for learning, particularly among more vulnerable individuals. Xena highlighted that access to language learning is shaped by stability and resources:

When people go to ESOL [English for Speakers of Other Languages] classes, it's only those who really are solid and settled and they have income.

(Xena, Czech Roma female, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Language was seen as a substantial challenge to engaging with services in the UK. In healthcare, limited English proficiency could restrict access to primary care, reduce understanding of diagnoses, and hinder informed decision-making. One Hungarian participant described an incident in which a relative was asked to consent to him being placed on a ventilator while he was unconscious. She agreed, understanding the request as asking whether a fan could be switched on to provide fresh air. Although she did not realise it, she was making a potentially life-altering decision.

Language and comprehension challenges were also frequently highlighted as affecting parents' communication with schools, limiting their ability to act on the information they received. Some participants said they would have welcomed greater support from schools in explaining important information. For example, one participant recalled receiving a letter stating that her child had special needs but, at the time, she was unable to comprehend it and felt unsupported:

Nobody took the time to explain what special needs is.

(Liliana, Romanian Roma participant, focus group)

Limited proficiency was also linked to difficulties asserting rights and challenging unfair employment practices, increasing risks of exploitation. Carmen described how the initial language barrier made it difficult to stand up to management, who consistently assigned her to refrigerator work, rather than sharing it fairly:

The people, I think, were playing with us and they sent us where it was cold... But because I didn't know the language and we could not speak it; we told them that we'd go. Then, slowly, I said... that's not right you should send others there... as well... then... it got better.

(Carmen, Romanian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Interpretation needs

While participants highlighted that interpreters could play an important role in mitigating language barriers, their accounts exposed complexity in accessing suitable language support. One challenge related to the unique, linguistic diversity within Roma communities. Participants spoke a range of languages, and their fluency varied considerably, with some young people, for example, fluent in Romanes and English, but not the language of their families' country of origin. There was also substantial variation in Romanes itself: participants who spoke it used different variants.

Key informants emphasised that service providers' limited understanding of Roma as a distinct ethnic group may lead to inaccurate assumptions about an individual's first language. This can undermine effective communication, particularly where specialist or complex vocabulary is used. Elle, a Romanian Roma civil society organisation (CSO) worker, stressed that members of the community she supports often struggle to understand the formal Romanian used by non-Roma translators. Where service providers are unaware of these challenges, misinterpretations can arise, such as perceiving an individual's inaction as a choice rather than a result of limited comprehension:

The assumption is made that communication is good. And if parents don't do something, it's because they choose not to do it, rather than they didn't understand.

(Magda, non-Roma key informant, voluntary sector, key informant interview)

In the context of social services, key informants suggested that incorrect assumptions about a family's first language increase the risk of misinterpreting family dynamics during case review. Magda gave examples where families with children taken into care were provided with non-Roma interpreters and required to use national languages in the supervised meetings so that services could understand them. She said, "suddenly those children are completely confused and put in an awful position where their parents speak to them in the language they don't understand". It was therefore seen as crucial that institutions working with Roma develop an understanding of their linguistic diversity and avoid making assumptions about interpretation needs.

Another challenge related to limited communities' trust in non-Roma interpreters from their countries of origin and concerns about them causing harm. Several participants expressed mistrust rooted in pre-migration experiences and, sometimes, reinforced through interactions in the UK. A few of the Romanian, Czech and Slovak participants spoke of negative experiences with non-Roma interpreters and teaching assistants:

At the beginning when my boys started it was super, but later, the Czech and Slovak interpreters came in and the problems started. They started to make differences between the Roma and English... they brought the system here to our schools...

(Johnny, Czech Roma male, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

This view was reinforced by key informants, who reported that interpreters sometimes relied on their own prejudiced assumptions rather than translating word for word. Adriana, a Romanian Roma CSO worker, noted that this can "result in a racist interpretation of what the person has said" and risks biasing service providers' perspectives.

To address limited access to suitable interpreters, many adults with limited English relied on their children for translation, sometimes at the request of service providers, placing them in age-inappropriate roles. Interpreting in complex settings, like medical appointments, could be beyond young people's comprehension, regardless of their English fluency.

We used to go to the doctors with [our parents], we had to explain everything to the doctors, which was hard as a 13/14-year-old, you didn't know the terms which were being used.

(Bartosz, Polish Roma participant, focus group)

This could lead to misdiagnosis, as in Liliana's husband's case. After being refused an interpreter, he attended a GP appointment with their son and, because of miscommunication, was prescribed treatment for depression despite not suffering from it.

Other participants highlighted sensitivities around discussing health issues in the presence of relatives, particularly those of a different age and sex. Claudiu, a healthcare professional himself, noted that for some Roma, avoiding discussion of such topics is an expression of "a form of respect" (Romanian Roma participant, focus group). It could, however, mean that certain symptoms, particularly those considered to be more sensitive, may not be discussed, risking inaccurate diagnosis.

Children identified within the "Gypsy or Roma" category were among those with the highest rates of school absences in England, according to the Department for Education's [pupil absences data for the academic year 2024 to 2025](#). Participants highlighted the challenges in accessing appropriate interpretation as a contributing factor. Some navigated these challenges by travelling to access healthcare abroad, which could disrupt children's school attendance. Milena (Bulgarian Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less) described losing her place in college after spending a few weeks abroad because of a medical emergency. Several participants also recalled missing school days because of interpretation responsibilities.

A lot of times, I had to be pulled out of school because my parents had an appointment somewhere, they didn't speak English and a lot of translators were very, very racist and they wouldn't translate what my parents would say.

(Karolina, Polish Roma participant, focus group)

Access to services and gaps in understanding of Roma communities

Participants and key informants repeatedly highlighted that some service providers lacked understanding of Roma, often conflating them with other EU migrants or with Gypsy and Traveller communities. They emphasised limited awareness of the long-term discrimination faced by Roma and its effects on access to education and levels of trust in public services, alongside the lack of flexibility in how services are delivered. A common view was that modes for engaging with services often excluded people with limited literacy and digital skills. Examples included reliance on apps to facilitate communication with schools or housing services, as well as for booking medical appointments.

My father is Roma, in Romania we were marginalised and I'm not afraid to say, my father didn't go to school so he doesn't know how to read or write... So it's very hard for him to book an appointment through the phone... I think they should have the option where people like my father can go there and book an appointment [at the reception].

(Claudiu, Romanian Roma participant, focus group)

Key informants also shared examples where services overlooked the precarious situations of vulnerable individuals. One common example related to families being penalised for reduced school attendance, after being relocated to temporary accommodation far from school:

Their attendance dropped quite a lot but she was still trying to get these children to school and the way the school approached that, that drop in attendance despite her being a victim of domestic abuse, not having much English herself, being plonked somewhere outside of London, having a huge drop in income, was to take her to court to fine her for the drop in attendance.

(Paul, non-Roma key informant, voluntary sector, focus group)

They also highlighted that limited awareness of specific cultural practices could lead to misinterpretations and undermine outcomes. Adela, a CSO worker, described a case where a social worker cited a grandmother using an alternative name for her grandson as evidence of a weak relationship, when in fact this reflected common Roma naming practices and indicated a close bond.

Limited institutional awareness of the experiences of disadvantage was seen to further erode individuals' trust in services, which for many had already been fractured before migration. This could lead individuals to avoid seeking help when needed, including for mental health support, because of fears of social services involvement. Participants' accounts also highlighted the need for more information and to raise awareness around confidentiality and reasons for referrals.

If I go tell the doctors and say I have depression, they will call social services on me and say that I have depression and can't look after my daughter.

(Dominika, Slovakian Roma woman, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

I did feel very stressed a few years ago and it was harder and harder for me to cope with the pressure and stress. So, I contacted my GP and the GP said, 'You might need some therapy'. So, I made an appointment with them and very close to the appointment, I actually realised, 'Wait a second. I'm a single mother, if I share something during my discussions, I might actually get more problems, I don't want to go for it.'

(Adriana, Romanian Roma key informant, voluntary sector, focus group)

Exclusion and data

Limited availability of data about Roma populations in the UK was identified by key informants as a fundamental barrier to informed service provision. They highlighted several factors contributing to poor representation of Roma people within available data, including inconsistent collection of ethnicity data, which limits understanding of the proportion of EU migrants who are Roma.

Nobody collects data about ethnicity... according to the data from the Home Office there are [over 20,000] Bulgarians in [our local authority]... but nobody knows how many of them are Roma.

(Emre, non-Roma key informant, local government, focus group)

Sometimes where ethnicity data are collected, the "Roma" option is subsumed within the "Gypsy, Roma, Traveller (GRT)" tick box. This was widely seen as problematic, because of distinct experiences and needs of these communities. Key informants stressed that Roma are typically settled rather than nomadic and can face additional barriers arising from their position as migrants and their pre-migration histories. Some participants felt that a "GRT" tick box did not represent their identity and described discomfort ticking the option:

They do 'Gypsy, Roma, Travellers' which is not the same at all, you know? The word 'Gypsy' also bothers me, when I see that... I think 'Do I need to tick there?'

(Tamas, Hungarian Roma participant, focus group)

The complexities around the use of the term "Gypsy" are explored in more detail in [Section 6: Identifying as Roma](#).

Alongside these challenges, both participants and key informants identified limited trust in public institutions as a barrier to effective data representation. Several participants expressed that they did not always feel safe to disclose their Roma ethnicity, because of historical misuse of such data in other countries, the legacy of which continues to undermine confidence in how data may be used. Read more detail in [Section 6: Identifying as Roma](#).

So, whenever there's a counting done for the Roma community, the Roma community will try to escape that, try to avoid as much as possible to state your ethnic identity. Because soon after the count was done, something terrible would happen. Deportations, shooting, arrests... so in our collective mind of our community, whenever someone wants to count us and to identify as by our ethnic profile, this is bad news.

(Stefan, Romanian Roma key informant, voluntary sector, key informant interview)

I've never, ever in my life, even till this day, I've never, ever said I'm Roma... in any form... because I'm scared that I'm going to go to the doctor and... they're going to see Roma, they're going to... kill you, I don't know... Like for an experiment or something because they've done it... in the past, so it's this kind of fear of like, they're going to do something.

(Karolina, Polish Roma participant, focus group)

Suggested improvements relating to access to services

In focus group discussions with service providers and representatives from the relevant government departments, participants and key informants suggested a range of ways to improve inclusion and reduce barriers to Roma accessing services. One recurring theme reflected the need to improve service providers' understanding of Roma communities, including the broader context of discrimination and its impacts:

I think it's so important that we work with... professionals and help them understand more about us. Help them understand where we come from because our life opportunities have been so different, as compared to others...

(Adriana, Romanian Roma key informant, voluntary sector, focus group)

There were suggestions that community-led training should be provided and acknowledgements that many service providers already made efforts to access it. Key informants suggested that such training could be incorporated into early professional development, with one stressing that "it has to happen really early, when people are students because that is... the right way to have long-lasting change... change entire attitudes of the workforce" (Natalie, non-Roma key informant). Key informants also emphasised the importance of meaningful collaboration between service providers and grassroots organisations, to support effective engagement and trusting relationships.

Increasing representation of Roma across different settings, including public institutions and services, was also seen as crucial. Participants shared positive examples of schools and healthcare providers employing Roma staff to mitigate communication challenges and build trust. Elena recalled her own experience working in a school. She described initiating meetings with Roma parents, and achieving high attendance from individuals who had previously had little engagement with the school:

First meeting, which was run by me, I invited [the] parents, and [the majority] attended... I invited the board, the chair and the head teacher, and they said... you managed to bring them together.

(Elena, Romanian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Improving the visibility of Roma communities, including through incorporating Roma history into the school curriculum, was also emphasised. Participants stressed the importance of ensuring Roma are represented in everyday contexts, such as public-facing materials or campaigns, to support feelings of being welcome and seen. Ana shared an example of her UK university tutor, who included a Roma character in a case study for her module:

She knew that I was Roma, and she put an example of Roma, a positive one... she was putting this there for me to identify and imagine how it feels... It was powerful.

(Ana, Romanian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Xena shared that Roma are often "just a negative statistic" and "what will make it better is... really seeing more of Roma... true examples of Roma lives and the struggles they go through" (Czech Roma female, aged 40 to 49, living in the UK between 11 and 20 years).

There was a sense of hope that such initiatives could support a more nuanced and realistic representation of Roma, challenge stereotypes, and support individuals to feel safe to disclose their identity.

Key informants also emphasised the importance of building capability among vulnerable members of the communities by offering digital skills training or affordable English classes.

So I think one potential solution but this is something medium term, long term, is really to educate [the] Roma community, improve their digital skills and their level of English, providing ESOL classes is one way forward and simply helping them, just to write an email, search something on Google, basic skills at least, would make such a big difference in their lives.

(Adriana, Romanian Roma key informant, voluntary sector, focus group)

They also advocated for more flexible ways to access and communicate with services, including alternatives to fully digital systems, and called for clear, accessible information on the support available from both local authorities and CSOs.

I think one of the solutions... if there was register of... what kind of help every borough gives to the people living in the borough because it's really high secret, if you're in the know, you know... So, it needs to be also updated plus all the organisations who are helping in every borough and what kind of help they give.

(Sylwia, non-Roma key informant, voluntary sector, focus group)

EU member states are expected to develop National Roma Integration Strategies to ensure coordinated, evidence-based action on inequalities, as outlined in the European Commission's [strategic framework for equality, inclusion and participation 2020](#). Key informants described advocacy work to encourage adoption of a similar long-term, government-led approach in the UK.

Although key informants noted that further development of grassroots organisations is needed to enhance access to support for Roma people across the UK, they also recognised considerable progress to date. Developing communities' capacity over recent years was seen as helping to create visible role models and foster pride among younger generations:

I've been working... with the Roma community for quite some time and I think it's a massive shift from what it's been 10 to 15 years ago, so now I think it's fantastic to see new faces because when we initially started, it was literally five people on a table. I think that needs to be celebrated and I think that will help... for the younger generation to feel '[we're] really proud we're Roma because we've got these role models'.

(Justyna, non-Roma key informant, local government, focus group)

5 . Negotiating inclusion, exclusion and belonging in England and Wales

Participants' narratives highlighted how they built relationships and negotiated belonging in the UK. Their accounts reflected a strong sense of feeling safer and more welcome in the UK than in their countries of origin, although experiences of discrimination and stereotyping were also reported. These related both to their Roma identity (particularly among younger participants, who were sometimes referred to as "Gypsies" at school) and to other aspects of identity, including skin colour and migrant status. Sharing aspects of Roma cultural heritage with others was seen as fostering positive relationships and mutual understanding with other communities.

Feeling welcome

Across the sample, participants generally perceived the UK as more ethnically diverse than their countries of origin, with lower awareness of Roma identity seen to offer greater anonymity and the ability to choose whether to disclose it. While, as discussed in [Section 4: Navigating access to services in England and Wales](#), this lack of visibility was also seen as a considerable challenge for effective service provision, some participants viewed it as beneficial in direct interactions, particularly in light of past experiences of discrimination.

Many Roma, they just prefer to say we're Romanian, we're Bulgarian. We are from Slovakia... Poland, but not Roma. Because of their bad experience in the countries they're coming from... [In the UK] some of the Eastern Europeans could recognise Roma by their [skin] colour... But most people, British people, they cannot recognise. So, you've got somehow an advantage to say I'm Roma or to hide.

(Stoyan, Bulgarian Roma male, aged 60 to 69 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

[In the UK, people] are surprised because they think we are Muslims, or Pakistani, or Kurdish. They don't know what Roma is.

(Michal, Czech Roma male, aged 20 to 29 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

Feelings of inclusion featured strongly in participants' accounts and, for the non-UK-born participants, were often contrasted with pre-migration experiences. Several participants expressed that in the UK they were treated as individuals and not seen through the lens of stereotypes about Roma. This was seen to support a sense of safety, with some emphasising they felt freer to express their Roma identity in public.

In the UK, I [am] just me, Xena, you know, and being Roma [is] just like a beautiful addition to it... Whereas in Czech, as soon as I walk into the public I'm somebody else. I take my hoop earrings off. I try to look as, don't try to look white, but I try to look as less typical 'Gypsy'... Whereas here, I'm proud. I just love it.

(Xena, Czech Roma female, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

I'd say that in Poland, for example, if I walk with my daughter or grandchildren, we don't necessarily speak Romani, because everyone starts staring at us. But here, we can speak freely, and nobody cares.

(Paulina, Polish Roma female, aged 50 to 59 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

Positive experiences of social interactions contributed to increased trust towards non-Roma among some participants.

I have experienced a lot of changes... changes to my character; my perception of non-Roma. At home, we had different perceptions of non-Roma. Here, everything has changed. Before, I thought that all people hate us. I thought that the whole world hates us. But when I came to the UK, I have discovered that they are not making differences between us and that they like me the way I am.

(Johnny, Czech Roma male, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

Experiences of hostility and stereotyping

Alongside these narratives of acceptance, participants also recounted experiences of exclusion, discrimination and harassment. Some young people, including those who had grown up in the UK, described being targeted based on their Roma ethnicity. Several recalled incidents of racial slurs and bullying at school:

They were saying 'Oh, are you going to steal something from the shop because you don't have money? Are you going to live on social benefits? You do not need to speak because you have an accent, you're Gypsy'... I did tell the teacher, and the teacher didn't do anything about it.

(Cristina, Romanian Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

There was a shared view among both young people and parents that bullying was not being adequately addressed, with some feeling that Roma pupils who tried to defend themselves were more likely to face disciplinary action and exclusions.

I've been excluded from school as well and it was because another student was being racist, was like bullying me and I stood up for myself in that moment. That child didn't get in trouble, I did.

(Karolina, Polish Roma participant, focus group)

More commonly, participants described experiences of discrimination related to other aspects of their identity such as gender or skin colour.

[In the UK] it's not because I'm Gypsy, it's because I may be migrant, or it's because I am woman, you know, possibly that I'm brown, you know, or I have an accent or, you know, but it's not anti-Gypsy is what I'm trying to say.

(Xena, Czech Roma female, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

For Romanian participants, nationality emerged as a frequently cited source of stereotyping and unfair treatment.

They hear that you are Romanian, they treat you badly.

(Andrei, Romanian Roma male, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Sometimes... I'm not telling people that I'm actually from Romania. I just tell them, if I meet them like just once, oh, I'm Eastern European. Not specifically where. Because especially with us, like I feel when I've seen it that we are the most discriminated Eastern Europeans.

(Alina, Romanian Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

There were also wider concerns about rising anti-immigration sentiment in the UK, particularly following Brexit, with events such as the Southport riots in summer 2024 cited as having a substantial emotional impact and undermining some participants' sense of safety and freedom to go outside.

[I had] to tell to my mum, 'don't go, don't let my daughter go out, or open the door and play in the front of the house' because I was afraid someone will start to scream at my daughter because she's more dark in the skin. You know, I was afraid. It was a scary time then.

(Ana, Romanian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Public acts of support towards migrants during the riots were seen as meaningful, leaving a powerful impression on participants. Florin recalled:

But then, the English gave us a lesson. In the city centre, some teenagers started harassing an immigrant – they were speaking badly to him. Some English people who were shopping with their families dropped everything and went over, grabbed those kids by the collar... and told them to leave the man alone. I was speechless.

(Florin, Romanian Roma male, aged 60 to 69 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Seeking connections

Participants described a range of sources from which they drew meaningful relationships and a sense of belonging. For many across the groups, family emerged as a central anchor. Participants reported spending most of their time with relatives and viewed these relationships as their main source of companionship and friendship.

My closest friends are my mother, my sisters, my husband and my children.

(Monika, Slovakian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

While some participants spoke of not having or seeking access to Roma networks where they lived, such connections were important for many younger and older participants, and usually involved Roma who were from the same country and who spoke the same language or variant of Romanes.

Such social networks commonly formed around shared experiences, such as parenthood, studying at university, or navigating similar life stages, and were described as offering a sense of understanding, safety, and freedom of expression, alongside shared heritage and traditions:

I feel better with the Roma community. We have our traditions and listening to songs and having our parties. I do meet with the others, but I am missing the traditions there. You can't act the way you want.

(Michal, Czech Roma male, aged 20 to 29 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

The first time when you look at someone there is a basic connection. When a person looks in another person's eyes... For me, simply, I have that feeling of 'I know you' coming from Roma people.

(Attila, Hungarian Roma male, aged 50 to 59 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Some, notably Romanian participants in the East of England and Bulgarian and Polish participants in London, highlighted faith-based communities as an important source of meaningful relationships. These areas appeared to have well-established faith communities, offering participants of different ages an opportunity to make friendships. They were also described as providing a sense of "peace and some comfort" (Lucyna, aged 50 to 59 years, Poland, living in the UK for over 20 years).

However, such communities were not equally accessible to all. Some participants expressed that there were no churches locally that reflected their faith or offered services in their preferred language.

Young people described making friendships through schools and recreational interest groups, with some preferring relationships with other Roma, and others having mixed networks. Places of employment were important for adults, often providing opportunities to connect with non-Roma and to build supportive networks. One example of this was given by Ferenc, who described his work friends as his family, and shared how his boss supported him through crisis:

He told me 'until you are here in the UK and your dad is not here, I'll be your dad. If you need help, I will support you'.

(Ferenc, Hungarian Roma male, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

English language proficiency was described as crucial for building connections with people outside Roma and same-country communities, and to fostering a sense of inclusion. Limited English skills could present a barrier to forming meaningful relationships beyond these networks, with some describing this as influencing their ability to express their personality freely, which could negatively affect self-esteem.

I don't know the language well, so I can't communicate as easily. It feels like I'm talking to a wall or through a phone. Even though I see the person, I can't understand their full mentality.

(Ryszard, Polish Roma male, aged 60 to 69 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

The language... I'm still learning. Sometimes I want to say more, to explain myself, but I don't have the words. And I worry people think I'm not smart, just because I can't speak fluently.

(Sofia, Slovakian Roma female, aged 20 to 29 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Building connections with non-Roma individuals was widely regarded as worthwhile. Participants emphasised the benefits for improving English, as well as wider personal growth. Attila shared his experiences of connecting with an international community and stressed its formative value for his outlook and identity:

This was a community that defined for me who I learn from about life, through seeing how they lived and worked together... There are many aspects to how someone can improve their lives. You know, you do not only keep alive only one community... This is important to not stick into one situation but let the things spin around you. Don't let yourself to stick into the hamster wheel that you built for yourself.

(Attila, Hungarian Roma male, aged 50 to 59 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

The participants who described feeling isolated in the UK referred to limited family and friendship networks. This loneliness was reported to have a negative impact on their well-being and mental health, contributing to feelings of sadness, stress and disconnection:

When you don't have family, you don't have anyone here, it's very hard, you're alone, you feel lonely, you don't know how to be positive, who to talk to.

(Andrei, Romanian Roma male, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Additionally, participants who observed social isolation among the wider Roma communities spoke about taking steps to help address this. One example was given by Alzbeta, who established a local group bringing Roma individuals together to build connections and share information:

We set up the group of people... Children came. They've been in a hall playing with the coach, and we've been with parents in other room. We had fun, we had food, we had everything, and we've been going through the whole year.

(Alzbeta, Slovakian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Sharing heritage to build bridges

Showcasing music, dance, food and other expressions of identity was widely seen as an opportunity to foster curiosity about Roma heritage, encourage dialogue and build bridges with other communities. Young participants described positive experiences of exchanging their cultural practices with peers via cultural days organised by schools to celebrate diversity and informal interactions:

My best friend is from Ireland, she is also a Traveller, and I am learning her culture, and she is learning my culture. She can dance Roma dance, she speaks Roma words, she also likes our Roma meals.

(Petra, Czech Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

The International Roma Day, celebrated each year on 8 April, was seen as an opportunity for raising awareness and creating engagement. Some participants were involved in organising events to celebrate it in their local area and felt joy and pride about how they have been received:

We had our Roma Day; we had our food there and a dance festival. It wasn't just us there, but also people from around the world. They tried our traditional food... Some politicians came too. They tried everything... There was no racism against Gypsies or anything like that. They liked it very much and they even danced with us.

(Michal, Czech Roma male, aged 20 to 29 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

Key informants similarly emphasised the value of creating opportunities to learn about Roma. They saw them as important for challenging stereotypes, engaging in meaningful dialogue and building more connected communities:

Education is the most important... educating teachers, neighbours, general public about us, about our culture, what is actually our culture. What it is about, is it all about stereotypes and negatives attached to the term, "Roma"? Or is it more about the positives about our music, we are very talented, we can craft, we have many talents as a community. Those are the things that we need to come out with, especially that this is a chapter in history.

(Adriana, Romanian Roma key informant, voluntary sector, focus group)

Defining home: belonging and place

The concept of "home" was frequently discussed in interviews. Across the sample, most of the participants who were not born in the UK tended to refer to their countries of origin as home. However, when asked explicitly where they felt their home was and where they belonged, accounts diverged. Some identified the UK, others the towns they grew up in and countries of origin, while a few felt as though they had no home.

When explaining what "home" meant to them, participants focused on three themes: family, safety, and personal history. For some, having close family abroad made it difficult to fully embrace the UK as home. For others, having their family in the UK appeared to enhance their connections and sense of belonging.

I'm definitely more warm to UK than anywhere else. But for me, my home is where my family is. If my family wasn't there, I probably would not call Czech home.

(Xena, Czech Roma female, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

I have a family, I have children, I have a husband, I have a house, here in the UK, and it's something incredibly beautiful. I feel like it's my home.

(Carmen, Romanian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Among older participants, feeling safer and more accepted after moving to the UK was an important contributor to forming attachment and perceiving it as home:

I felt beautiful because no one was moving away from me... I felt like I found my right home and I hope that it will be forever.

(Richard, Czech Roma male, aged 50 to 59 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

I feel like this is my real home. I feel much safer here than I do in Poland.

(Beata, Polish Roma female, aged 50 to 59 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

Experiencing important life events and milestones, such as growing up, childbirth or building a career were also seen as strongly influencing the understanding of home. For some of the younger participants, living through these events in the UK appeared to consolidate their belonging in the country. Others, across different age groups, emphasised the ongoing connection to their countries of origin, based on memories, personal history and a place of birth:

Hungary is still my home. Because I came from there. Just because I live here it won't change who I am and what I will be.

(Erika, Hungarian Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

I grew up in Poland, so that country is very close to me... Wherever you're born, you feel connected to that place. I care about where I was born, my village. That's where my history is tied... Now, it's been over 20 years since I've been here, but the pull of where I grew up, where I went to school, is still strong.

(Ryszard, Polish Roma male, aged 60 to 69 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

Some of the participants who had children growing up in the UK felt that their children were not connected to their parents' countries of origin, instead perceiving the UK as their home.

When we go home to Czech... our kids are not used to it. They will look forward to go, but after about 2 to 3 days they will say: 'dad, let's go home'. 'But you are home here?' and they say: 'no, our home is in England'

(Johnny, Czech Roma male, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

A recurring theme was the wish to maintain balance between retaining connection to participants' heritage and developing a sense of belonging in the UK. Participants often had ongoing connections with their countries of origin. At the same time, many embraced growing attachments to the UK, participated in British cultural celebrations and felt pride about their children's proficiency in English.

6 . Identifying as Roma

Participants' identities emerged as multi-layered, with "Roma" forming one aspect among several, including national and professional identities. Their reflections on the terms used to describe their ethnic identity highlighted tensions around language and categorisation. Participants described how their identities were at times contested by others, which reinforced stereotypes and exclusion. Decisions about disclosure of ethnicity were often strategic and shaped by previous and ongoing experiences of discrimination, and concerns about how Roma identity would be perceived.

Layered identities

Participants were invited to reflect on the main influences that had shaped who they are today. Their responses highlighted multiple, layered aspects of identity that they considered important to their understanding of self.

Personal history emerged as a core element of identity for many participants, whose narratives emphasised memories of places and communities in which they grew up. Janos reflected on his childhood in a Roma settlement, describing a sense of privilege in how the wisdom of older community members had shaped him:

I was lucky, because I think I was the last generation who saw real elderly like the Roma when they gathered and what they were talking about... the philosophy they were talking about, honestly, like you read about this in books now... you know about, for example, living in the now... and experience what you are, and who you are with, and what is around you at the moment.

(Janos, Hungarian Roma male, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Professional roles were widely discussed as an important influence on identity, particularly in relation to providing material security for families and contributing to a sense of personal fulfilment. Ferenc described how securing stable employment enhanced his sense of identity, which was reinforced when he met an old acquaintance during a holiday in Hungary:

It gave me such a power and good feeling that I can't explain. I was just joking with him, but I was feeling good for it. So, I could say, you see, I could show that I also achieved something and show that I am also someone.

(Ferenc, Hungarian Roma male, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Participants also discussed being Roma as an integral element of who they are. The importance of Roma history featured prominently in these accounts. Across different age groups, many expressed a strong commitment to raising awareness of the historical crimes against Roma by speaking up in schools or through their advocacy work.

This is also a very important aspect for me to speak about the forgotten Holocaust, the Roma Holocaust. This is also a very important part of my work.

(Attila, Hungarian Roma male, aged 50 to 59 years living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Alongside a broader Roma identity, participants at times highlighted their belonging to specific Roma groups, such as Olah, or Kalaydji. Many also embraced their national identities, describing themselves as, for example, Czech or Polish or, particularly among those growing up in the UK, as British.

I just tell people that I'm a Czech native. Well, okay, I would also describe myself to be more British and Czech, because I have more British values, because I grew up here and I don't really know the [Czech] language as well.

(Veronika, Czech Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, participant interview)

I identify as Roma, Slovak. But now also a little bit British. Not fully but starting to feel it. My son says he is Slovak and British. That makes me proud. I want him to grow up knowing who he is but also feeling like he belongs here.

(Sofia, Slovakian Roma female, aged 20 to 29 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Retaining connection to roots, heritage and faith

Participants were invited to reflect on what being Roma meant to them. Although values, traditions or cultural practices varied, several were commonly described. Many highlighted the importance of gathering over food, around barbecues and bonfires, as well as playing music and dancing.

... to stay together, cook together... making bonfire and playing music. These things that as a Roma we love to experience. To stay together, be together and enjoy the atmosphere.

(Attila, Hungarian Roma male, aged 50 to 59 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Dancing is a big part of Roma culture. We laugh, spend time – it's a good time.

(Dawid, Polish Roma male, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Several participants across different age groups spoke about playing musical instruments, performing in bands, or joining dance groups. Engagement in these activities was sometimes perceived as important for maintaining connection with their heritage after settling in the UK. One mother expressed that as her children spent most of their time with English peers, going to a Roma dance group gave them a chance to "learn about our culture too" (Judit, Hungarian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less).

Across the sample, participants also highlighted several recurring values that they felt to be central to their identity, and that were shared by individuals with different characteristics. These included a focus on family, responsibility towards relatives, and respect for others, considered particularly important towards older generations.

Respect for elders and family support in times of trouble – that's something we have in our culture.

(Paulina, Polish Roma female, aged 50 to 59 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

The importance of community was also widely emphasised. Several participants described Roma community as an extension of family and highlighted the importance of unity over individualism.

There is no idea of individual or individualism, like you're by yourself or anything. Now it's community.

(Alina, Romanian Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

When something happens to another Roma, it hurts. Even if they're a stranger, it hits hard. All Roma are somehow connected, like one big family.

(Dariusz, Polish Roma male, aged 60 to 69 years living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

The Roma anthem and flag were viewed as important symbols of belonging, carrying particular significance in fostering a sense of identity and unity within a transnational community:

The Roma flag means... we are all spilt around the world but don't have our own country... The colour green in our flag means grass and the ground, the blue means the sky, and the wheel on the flag means we all are around the world, we travel everywhere. The flag also means we will always be all together, and we will always be Roma.

(Martin, Slovakian Roma male, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

The values attached to family and community were also linked to a strong sense of reciprocity. Participants emphasised the importance of empathy and helping others, which for many translated into practical action, such as volunteering or supporting others in need.

A recurring theme across participants' accounts was the importance placed on faith and spirituality. Participants identified with a range of faiths, including Orthodox and Pentecostal Christianity, Islam and Jehovah's Witness. Within narratives of faith, God was described as a higher power, who created everyone equal and who offered protection in situations beyond an individual's control.

For us it's very important to have God in our life, and for [my daughter] to understand the hope and support of God... I want her to feel that in any time, you are not alone, all the time you have God.

(Ana, Romanian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Participants highlighted studying religious text and prayer as ways of getting closer to the higher power and gaining wisdom. Faith was seen to provide guidelines for life, moral direction, a sense of meaning and emotional support.

Being Christian... it's actually personal, like relationship with God... So, if I'm close to God... if I'm following what God says... You know, it makes me happy. If I do all that, everything makes sense. You know, my life makes sense... And everything kind of fits in together and I know I am protected. I know my son is protected because we can't protect our children a lot.

(Xena, Czech Roma female, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

The Bible... offers support. And every time I read it, it releases all the stresses, it releases all the frustrations, despair and helps me.

(Dorin, Romanian Roma male, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Additionally, some of the participants from Hungary, Slovakia and Romania described the importance of permanence of marriage and maintaining community-defined notions of respectability in interactions with the opposite sex.

The most important is to get married "pure". If she chooses a husband who she loves, they need to stay together forever. I told my daughters they must stick to their chosen husbands.

(Judit, Hungarian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

When we are in a situation like men sitting together, my husband doesn't have to tell me to please go away. I know that when men are sitting at a table I automatically don't go inside that room... Even when I was living in Hungary and going out, I was only going out with the girls. We don't get in touch with other men. We respect our husbands, our families.

(Eszter, Hungarian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Changing values and traditions

At times, participants explained that certain values they viewed as commonly accepted by their communities did not align with their own beliefs and identities. Some described internal conflicts and difficulties navigating their identity as a gay person, or a single mother in the context of wider communities' expectations. Sometimes this was linked to a desire to challenge these norms, as described by Ingrid, whose parents struggled with her decision to divorce her husband. In bringing up her own children, Ingrid wanted them to "know they can re-marry... and they can speak about it" (Slovakian Roma female, aged 20 to 29 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less).

Participants also highlighted that traditions and values are ever-changing. Examples included changing expectations around gender roles. Ana and Alzbeta highlighted that while women had traditionally been expected to look after the family and men to act as breadwinners, these roles were becoming increasingly flexible.

In the past, we were not seeing so many Roma, who were working women. But right now, it's changed, and you can see a lot of women that are working, study in the university.

(Ana, Romanian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

And it's also these mothers are not [saying to their sons] 'Oh, you cannot go in the kitchen...' They are more often like, 'Come and prepare yourself for the life because you don't need to depend only on women.'

(Alzbeta, Slovakian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Alongside recognising these changes, some participants voiced concerns about losing values that they saw as important elements of Roma identity. These included fears about erosion of faith, loss of community, and a move towards individualism.

All I'd want to change is for [Roma] to be with God again. Follow God...

(Andrej, Slovakian Roma male, aged 60 to 69 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

I wouldn't say it's good these days... Everyone lives their own lives, and they don't want to help others. Before, we were more together... before, we were helping each other...

(Jakub, Czech Roma male, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

There were also concerns about the loss of connection to heritage, illustrated by the perceived decline in use of the Romanes language among some Roma groups. This was seen to be linked to historic persecution, pressures to integrate, and migration. Some participants expressed embarrassment about not being fluent, others felt emotional about the loss of a cultural asset:

It's disappearing, this language. It's really sad. It's very sad.

(Alzbeta, Slovakian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Tensions around terms used to describe Roma identity

Participants' narratives highlighted tensions around terms used to describe Roma identity.

Several participants, across the groups, described themselves as "Gypsy". In this context, the term did not refer to the Romani Gypsy ethnic group but reflected a translation of "igan" (in Romanian, or its equivalent in other languages), an informal label sometimes applied to Roma across Europe. While the term was often embraced in informal, social contexts, many participants expressed discomfort in it being applied by others. It was often linked to negative judgement and stereotypes, and seen to be externally imposed throughout history, to stigmatise Roma.

The word 'Gypsy' is a very, very racist term. It's equivalent to the N-word in my eyes because it wasn't a name that I gave, that Roma people gave to themselves, it was a name that people from the outside gave them... Also like in the English 'to gyp', someone, like 'to gyp', 'to steal something', that is also associated with that, and I think it's like a lot of Roma people don't like that name, but yet it is still commonly used.

(Karolina, Polish Roma participant, focus group)

When my teachers say the word 'Gypsy', I correct them straight away and say... 'did you know it's racist to say 'Gypsy'?' That's what Hitler used to call us'. And they say... 'what?' I say: 'yes, don't you know it? And from now on you have to say 'Roma' (laughing). I do it like this with everyone.

(Petra, Czech Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Participants frequently highlighted the need to educate the UK service providers about these tensions to support trusting relationships and fair representation. Sabina described her relative's experience of supporting another Roma family during social services involvement. She recalled that the mother asked the social worker to leave after he repeatedly referred to the family as "Gypsies", which he later interpreted as aggression. Reflecting on this, Sabina noted:

You shouldn't come into someone's house not understanding the community and not understanding what's okay and what's not okay because that is extremely offensive to someone who doesn't, you know, recognise that as an identity.

(Sabina, Roma participant, focus group)

Using the term "Gypsy" was also seen to reflect confusion and reinforce the misperception that Roma and Romani Gypsy are one group.

Some people need to be educated on that. I had teachers as well refer to us as Gypsies, and Gypsy and Roma is two different things, which people don't even know that.

(Zuzana, Slovak Roma participant, focus group)

The term Roma was widely considered by participants as more appropriate for reflecting the unique history and identity of participants.

Contested identities

Participants recounted experiences in which others questioned, challenged or denied their national or Roma identity, which was viewed as a means of excluding or stereotyping. Participants described situations from their countries of origin, where their right to identify with that nation was contested. One participant recalled being asked to complete a form that included a question on nationality, during his military service. When he later saw the form again, he discovered that his selection of "Bulgarian" had been crossed out.

Similar experiences of contesting national identity and belonging were described in educational settings in countries of origin. In some cases, this involved being prevented by teachers from participating in traditional celebrations, while for others exclusion occurred among peers. For example, Alina discussed her sibling's experience during a school performance in Romania:

It was for the National Romanian Day. And imagine, like, 30 children around the age of seven, they had to hold the Romanian flag and then there was this other boy that was like, 'Oh, you can't touch the flag because you're Roma, because you're Gypsy. You cannot touch this flag.'

(Alina, Romanian Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

In other accounts, participants described experiences in which their Roma identity was questioned or contested by others, particularly when their experiences and achievements did not align with prevailing negative stereotypes. Many felt that public representations of Roma emphasised vulnerability, leaving little room for narratives that diverged from this framing. This was perceived as marginalising Roma who were not seen as vulnerable, while reinforcing narrow and limiting stereotypes about Roma identity.

They think that all the Roma need to live in tents or caravans or this kind of things, that if they see someone educated, you are not anymore Roma. No, still I am Roma, but I had other opportunities... And like me, there are millions of people, but we are more invisible... Because when you start to be educated, have a good job, they say, 'Ah, this one stopped to be Roma, because Roma is only negative'.

(Ana, Romanian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Sometimes even people ask me, now, here, when they see me, and when I say where I work and what I do; they're like... 'Are you really Roma? Maybe you are mixed with white a little bit or something'. Not because of my skin, but because of what I accomplished and who I am, how I talk, how I express myself, what I do and stuff.

(Xena, Czech Roma female, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Disclosing Roma ethnicity

Participants' narratives highlighted ongoing tensions linked to disclosure of Roma ethnicity. While some expressed feeling comfortable sharing their ethnic identity, fear of disclosure emerged as a strong and recurring theme. Sharing ethnicity was widely perceived as carrying the risk of discrimination, stereotyping, or direct harm. Participants often described these fears as deeply rooted, shaped by past experiences and reinforced through wider social attitudes and representations.

Even now sometimes I won't say I'm Roma or Gypsy just because of the stereotypes and just because of what would happen. And that's the thing that I feel that shaped me in making me who I am now. I'm still sometimes afraid to tell people who I actually am.

(Alina, Romanian Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Similar feelings were expressed by participants of different nationalities and ages, including those who had grown up in the UK. These perceptions appeared to be influenced both by intergenerational trauma and firsthand experiences of discrimination. Some young people described how their parents, seeking to protect them, encouraged them to conceal their ethnicity, a view that was sometimes reinforced by their own experiences.

[My parents] told me not to tell anyone I am Roma... At the time, I didn't get it... Because I was thinking... I am still a kid, why would [people] care about my culture? And now... I hear someone shout at me calling me 'dirty'... So, I understand now how my parents meant it... they tried to protect me from feeling this racism being so young.

(Petra, Czech Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Disclosing ethnicity was presented as strategic and context dependent. Respect, curiosity and kindness emerged as important factors in helping participants to feel safe discussing their ethnic identity. Building trusting relationships often took time. Schools were frequently named among the settings that, through regular positive interactions, could foster a sense of safety around discussions of ethnic identity.

I tell people I'm from Slovakia, but I don't always say I'm Roma. It depends. Some people are curious and kind. Others are not. There's still stigma. At my son's school, I didn't say at first, but later I did, and they were supportive. But at the job centre, once I said it, the tone changed. So, I choose carefully.

(Sofia, Slovakian Roma female, aged 20 to 29 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

For those who felt more comfortable disclosing their identity, this appeared to be influenced by the presence of strong role models within families and the wider communities, participation in programmes celebrating Roma identity and cultural diversity, involvement with Roma civil society organisations (CSOs), and positive interactions with non-Roma. These experiences could encourage individuals to adopt advocacy roles.

Some participants described advocacy as a way to reclaim identity in the face of oppression and to challenge harmful stereotypes. Young people gave examples of educating their peers to support a more nuanced understanding of Roma. Ana described telling colleagues at work she was Roma to pre-empt and avoid potential derogatory comments. Others spoke of sharing their identity as a means of role modelling and fostering a sense of pride among other Roma, which they viewed as fundamental for future generations.

We are helping and supporting people to be proud of themselves, promoting and raising awareness of who we are, and then the next generation can be proud of this affiliation.

(Elena, Romanian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

7 . Aspirations and hopes for the future

Aspirations and hopes for the future varied across participants of different age groups, reflecting their diverse life stages. Younger participants, many of whom were still in education, focused their ambitions on future careers such as law, medicine, policing, business, and hair and beauty services, among others. They described actively working towards these goals, including learning skills through social media platforms and making strategic decisions about their college and university education.

I will study law, criminology and business [in college]. I think that is something that will help me in the future when I want to become a solicitor.

(Petra, Czech Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

When asked about their motivations, several themes emerged in young people's responses. Some shared their hopes to improve their economic situation, often linking these ambitions to a sense of responsibility towards their families. Bence, for example, hoped that his future barber shop would create employment opportunities for his relatives. Similarly, Jana discussed how her commitment to education and weekend work was fuelled by a desire to support her parents:

I've seen how my parents were struggling so that's why I am at school and I'm working. So I can give my parents the life they deserve.

(Jana, Slovakian Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Other important motivators included participants wanting to prove to themselves and others what they can achieve, to challenge stereotypes, and to make their family proud. Young people were also motivated by the desire to take advantage of what they perceived as greater opportunities available in the UK:

I know that in Bulgaria, I can have options, but they're less likely to come true than here. So, I'm taking the advantage of being here and like actually doing something that I wouldn't have, like the advantage to do in Bulgaria.

(Yana, Bulgarian Roma female, aged 14 to 19 years, living in the UK for 10 years or less, participant interview)

Aspirations expressed by participants aged between 20 to 55 years tended to focus on personal growth and improving their existing circumstances, as well as aspiring for their children to access education, secure employment, and socio-economic opportunities. Examples of personal goals included to improve English proficiency, develop their career and gain additional qualifications. Some participants spoke of attending evening English classes or, like Eszter, being in adult education:

I had a chance to study here. I signed up for a course; I'm in the third year and next year I graduate. So, yes, after 30 I started to really care about achieving something more in my life.

(Eszter, Hungarian Roma female, aged 30 to 39 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

Others had clearly mapped trajectories for progressing within their professions, while for some the priority was finding employment that was better paid and more stable. Advocacy and purposeful work were also discussed by some participants as a means of developing their skills to improve the lives of others.

I want a job where I can help people... I'd love to study something that would help me to support our Roma people, the young and old. So, I can become like some sort of inspiration.

(Johnny, Czech Roma male, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for over 20 years, participant interview)

The white non-Roma people do so much for us, and they help us so much. They speak for us. We need to stand up and start speaking for ourselves. But the only way to do it is to get educated... For me, I'm not chasing titles, I [got a degree] because I knew it's going to get me to the higher table, and my voice would be louder.

(Xena, Czech Roma female, aged 40 to 49 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview).

Those aged over 55 years tended to express hope for security and a good life for their families. They emphasised the importance of good health, emotional well-being, spiritual growth, and family relationships, over material wealth.

My dream isn't to be rich in money, but emotionally rich. To see my family grow my children, my grandchildren, and eventually their children. That's the wealth I dream of. To live long enough to witness that, to enjoy it.

(Dariusz, Polish Roma male, aged 60 to 69 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

We don't need anything, just our children to make themselves into something in this world.

(Ivana, Slovakian Roma female, aged 70 to 79 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

There was also a sense of gratitude expressed by some, as they reflected on their lives:

People who come to this world and leave this world will not take anything with them to the other side other than the clothes you are wearing and the coffin they put you in. I am thankful for everything.

(Andrej, Slovakian Roma male, aged 60 to 69 years, living in the UK for between 11 and 20 years, participant interview)

8 . Lived experiences of Roma people in England and Wales data

[Lived experiences of Roma people in England and Wales: Sample information](#)

Dataset | Released 22 September 2026

Sample information for qualitative research on the lived experiences of Roma people living in England and Wales.

9 . Glossary

Gadze or Gadjó

A Roma term commonly used to describe people of non-Roma origin.

Civil society organisations (CSOs)

Formally registered organisations operating independently of government to advance public or community interests rather than generate profit. Examples include charities, community interest companies, and co-operatives.

Participants

In this research, the term refers to Roma individuals who took part in interviews and focus groups to share their experiences.

Key informants

In this research, the term refers to service providers, from both Roma and non-Roma backgrounds, who participated in a professional capacity, contributing their experiences and expertise of working with and supporting Roma communities. This group included representatives from voluntary organisations, local government and services (for example, education, health, and law).

Immigration status

A person's permission or right to be in the UK under immigration law, and any conditions attached to that permission, which determine what they can do in the UK, such as working, studying, and accessing public services.

EU Settlement Scheme

The EU Settlement Scheme applies to those who were resident in the UK before the end of the post-Brexit transition period at 11pm on 31 December 2020, and who are citizens of:

- the European Union (EU)
- other European Economic Area (EEA) countries
- Switzerland

In line with the Citizens' Rights Agreements, the EU Settlement Scheme grants permission to people in these categories, and their family members, to enter, or remain in, the UK.

Settled status

Indefinite leave to enter (ILE) or indefinite leave to remain (ILR) granted under the EU Settlement Scheme, usually where the person has lived in the UK for a continuous five-year period (known as "continuous residence"). Settled status means that a person has immigration status under UK law and there is no time limit on how long they can stay in the UK. People with settled status can work, study, use the NHS, access public funds such as benefits and pensions (if they are eligible for them), and travel in and out of the UK, subject to time restrictions.

Pre-settled status

Limited leave to enter (LTE) or limited leave to remain (LTR) granted under the EU Settlement Scheme, initially for a period of five years. Pre-settled status means that a person has immigration status under UK law and can work, study, use the NHS, access public funds, such as benefits and pensions (if they are eligible for them), and travel in and out of the UK, subject to time restrictions.

Pre-settled status holders are able to apply for settled status as soon as they have accrued five years' continuous residence in the UK. In some cases, pre-settled status may be automatically converted to settled status, without the holder having to make a further application to the EU Settlement Scheme.

Share code

A unique code generated through the UK Visas and Immigration online system, allowing individuals to prove their immigration status under the EU Settlement Scheme. Employers, landlords and service providers can use this code to verify a person's right to work, rent and access public services, in the UK.

10 . Methodology

The Office for National Statistics (ONS) conducted this research in partnership with [Migration Yorkshire](#), [Roma Support Group](#) (RSG) and [University of Sheffield](#). These organisations have an in-depth understanding of Roma communities and well-established networks, developed through years of experience providing support and conducting research with Roma.

Two advisory groups informed and guided the research throughout the project cycle, including refining study focus, developing participant materials, consulting on early findings and the dissemination strategy. One group offered expertise based on lived experience and professional understanding of the communities. This group comprised academics, members of Roma communities, and civil society organisations (CSOs). The second group helped to ensure relevance to policy and service delivery by bringing together colleagues from central government departments and Welsh Government, who provided advice on policy context, stakeholder engagement, and areas of interest.

We adopted a peer research approach to facilitate access to communities, enable participants to express themselves in their preferred language, and help to address power imbalances during interviews. The data were gathered through 63 in-depth interviews between February and June 2025. Of these, 54 were conducted by 11 peer researchers, and 9 were conducted by an experienced non-Roma researcher to support peer researcher training and mitigate availability issues.

Interviews were approximately 1 hour in length and took place primarily face-to-face, with 11 participants opting to be interviewed online. Over half of those interviewed online were aged 14 to 18 years, with some of the older participants choosing this option because of mobility issues or discomfort around in-person interviews, when a peer researcher of the same sex was not available.

The sample included Roma from six countries of origin:

- the Czech Republic
- Bulgaria
- Hungary
- Poland
- Romania
- Slovakia

The sample also included those born in the UK. Participants were recruited in five locations across England and Wales, including:

- East of England
- North West
- London
- Yorkshire and Humber
- Wales

The selection of countries of origin and research locations was informed by consultations with research partners and advisory groups. The sample was designed to meet the following aims:

- recognise and explore the diversity of experiences of individuals from different Roma groups, representing diverse beliefs, traditions, migration histories and settlement patterns in the UK
- capture a diverse range of perspectives across sex and age groups
- acknowledge that individuals' experiences are shaped not only by their background but also by the local contexts in which they live, and to avoid overrepresenting evidence from a single locality
- support participant recruitment by including locations with high Roma populations and existing CSOs

The interviews took place in participants' preferred languages, including Romanes, English, and languages of the countries of origin. Participants were reimbursed for their time.

In addition, the ONS team held online interviews with 19 key informants from CSOs supporting Roma, local government, and services, such as health and education. These interviews aimed to provide contextual understanding of challenges faced by Roma and to explore these from the perspective of service providers.

Jointly with Roma Support Group, the ONS team also facilitated five focus groups, bringing together community members, service providers, and local and central government. The discussions focused on the initial findings from the interviews and explored participants' perspectives on the main challenges, as well as their suggestions for potential improvements, with a view to providing insights that could inform future service provision.

Working with peer researchers

The peer researchers were recruited by our research partners from the six national groups included in this research. Efforts were made to include a balance of males and females of different ages and to match interviewers and participants on these characteristics where possible, to support comfort and freedom of expression.

The peer researchers received training from the University of Sheffield and the ONS on interviewing techniques, data protection, ethics and safeguarding. Migration Yorkshire's researcher provided one-to-one support and mentoring throughout data collection. In-depth feedback and support were offered, on an individual basis, after the first interviews.

The ONS team hosted fortnightly meetings online where peer researchers shared their experiences interviewing, reflected on emerging themes and received further support and debriefing. Peer researchers were also invited to take part in focus groups, and to attend an analytical workshop, where they contributed to the interpretation of findings. Their community connections, trust, and familiarity played an important role in recruitment, interviewing and interpretation.

Sampling and analysis

Participants were recruited through peer researchers' networks, Roma Support Group, and CSOs operating in the research localities. We adopted maximum variation purposive sampling to ensure diverse experiences and perspectives were explored. We thus aimed to include a balance of male and female participants of different ages, covering six selected nationalities. Peer researchers also aimed to include individuals with different lengths of residence in the UK and varied migration statuses.

The data were analysed inductively, using a qualitative thematic analysis methodology to identify emergent themes, patterns and concepts from participants' accounts. The approach involved:

- early familiarisation with the data to note initial patterns
- drafting codes
- collating codes into broader themes
- restructuring, refining and interpreting themes

Codes and themes were iteratively reviewed by the research team to test emerging patterns, build consensus, and deepen interpretation, including through analysing data across participants with different characteristics. The research findings were reviewed and tested with peer researchers and advisory groups through consultative workshops.

Limitations

- Because of the qualitative nature of the research, it is important to acknowledge that the findings may not be generalisable to other settings and reflect a particular time and context.
- The sample included a small number of UK-born participants, and the findings largely reflect the experiences of participants who were first-generation migrants; as the demographic profile of Roma communities in England and Wales changes over time, with more individuals born and raised in the UK, future research may identify different experiences, needs and priorities.
- Recruitment via peer researcher and CSOs' networks means that members of the communities who are particularly isolated and unable to access CSOs' support are unlikely to have been included in this research.
- The sample did not include individuals who migrated to the UK after the end of the post-Brexit transition period (31 December 2020), whose experiences may differ.
- Peer research has the potential to produce data that are richer and more reflective of the communities whose experiences are being explored; while most peer researchers were new to qualitative interviewing, their skills developed with practice, feedback, and ongoing support, leading to increasingly detailed data over time.
- As different peer researchers focused on participants from specific countries of origin, our ability to draw interpretations on the basis of this characteristic was limited because of individual differences in interviewing approach and choice of probing questions.

Acknowledgements

The Inclusive Research team in the Centre for Equalities and Inclusion would like to thank all those who have contributed their skills, knowledge and experience to this research. This work would not have been possible without the generous input of our research participants, peer researchers, Migration Yorkshire, Roma Support Group, University of Sheffield, members of our two advisory groups, and supporting organisations.

Peer researchers

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The cross-government advisory group

Representatives from: Cabinet Office, Department for Education, Department for Health and Social Care, Home Office, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, UK Health Security Agency, Welsh Government

The civil society organisations who contributed to the research

BG Centre UK, Clifton Learning Partnership, European Drom, Luton Roma Trust, Roma Access Newcastle, Roma Voice Centre, TGP CYMRU, Union Romani Voice

11 . Related links

[Roma populations, England and Wales: Census 2021](#)

Article | Released 30 October 2023

Exploring the outcomes for Roma populations compared with the usual resident population of England and Wales using Census 2021 data.

[Gypsies' and Travellers' lived experiences, overview, England and Wales: 2022](#)

Article | Released 7 December 2022

Overview of qualitative research exploring the lives experiences of Gypsies and Travellers in England and Wales.

12 . Cite this article

Office for National Statistics (ONS), released 22 September 2026, ONS website, article, [Lived experiences of Roma people in England and Wales: 2025](#)