



## **NATT+**

### **Best Practice Guidance for Schools Working with Roma Children and Families**

#### **Introduction**

This document has been written to help to improve the knowledge and understanding of Eastern European Roma communities residing in the UK. It has been written primarily for senior leaders, teachers and support staff in schools but will also be useful for other professionals working with these communities.

#### **Ethnicity and Ascription**

Eastern European Roma people are a recognised minority ethnic group and therefore are entitled to protection under the Equality Act 2010. This means that their ethnicity, culture, language, religion or beliefs need to have due recognition and acknowledgement.

Many families from Roma communities choose not to declare their ethnic status to schools and other official bodies for fear of discrimination. Whilst this is understandable, schools have a duty to monitor pupil attainment to ensure that no group is disadvantaged and to address any equalities in educational outcomes.

Current available data shows that Roma pupils do less well than other pupils nationally but given the correct environment and experiences, there is no reason why Roma children cannot be equally as successful as any other group of pupils. There are many individual pupils from Roma communities who can, and do, excel at school and achieve national expectations.

#### **Knowing your Roma Community**

The term “Roma” is often used to refer to people of Romani origin; this term has been adopted by many organisations including the EU and UK government. It is believed all Romani people originate from Northern India who started to migrate between 500 and 1,000AD. For UK purposes the term Roma refers to Romani people who settled in Central and Eastern European countries such as Romania, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Poland. Roma form the largest ethnic minority group in Europe with an estimated population of around 10-12 million.

Unlike English Gypsies, who were first recorded in England in the 1500s; most Roma communities have arrived in the UK after 2004 as migrant workers. Some Roma families did arrive prior to this date, mostly as asylum seekers and refugees. Roma communities have a long history of persecution, marginalisation and exclusion which still remains prevalent today. Although this is not the case for all Roma people, the vast majority of Roma families live in segregated settlements or neighbourhoods, often with poor access to basic amenities and little chance of meaningful work opportunities. In many circumstances they are denied an acceptable level of education and many Roma children do not complete their statutory schooling. As a result of this there is a high level of literacy difficulties amongst Roma adults and they remain a vulnerable group at risk of continued isolation and hostility.

Roma people are not a homogenous group of people and there are many different characteristics between different groups. Some Roma communities still wear traditional dress such as long skirts and head scarfs for women whereas others do not. Likewise some Roma communities continue to speak their own language “Romanes” whilst others may only now speak a few words. Despite these distinct characteristics there are

some commonalities -two such examples are the importance of a very strong family unit and a need for domestic cleanliness.

Following typical migration patterns, Roma families and communities tend to follow each other, so new arrivals in a particular region of the UK often come from the same region in another country. Understanding where your Roma children and families have come from is essential. Knowing whether or not they have lived in a segregated community at home, are from an urban or rural area or have received some form of education is very useful. Knowing these things will help the school understand the children and community more, support tracking and inclusion and so help meet the needs of the Roma child more effectively.

### **Induction: Creating an atmosphere of trust, safety and mutual respect.**

“Roma families really notice when a school is welcoming and helpful; this doesn’t happen very often in the Czech Republic. “

David Pongo, Czech Roma undergraduate

Like any parent, Roma parents put a great deal of trust in schools and school staff in the UK to provide a safe environment for their children to learn. For many Roma families previous experiences with “authority” figures will have been very negative. They may have been denied their basic human rights and often faced open hostility and discrimination. To put their trust in schools and teachers may take time, so developing, maintaining and fostering this relationship is critically important.

- Using an interpreter is important so that communication is clear and the family know from the outset how to support their child. It is worth noting that the notion of a partnership arrangement between school, child and parent will be a new concept for many Roma families as this has not been their prior experience.
- A home visit can help to establish a trusting relationship and can be easily arranged by contacting parents directly or with the help of a relevant local authority contact. Demonstrating a commitment to collaboration and co-operative working with colleagues and parents can help to establish trusting relationships.

- The first meeting inevitably sets the tone and influences how the partnership develops. Roma adults may have experienced a lifetime of being judged and discriminated against (including during their own school days) and will appreciate teachers who greet them in a way that conveys honesty, genuine warmth, respect and understanding.
- By talking openly with parents, reassuring them and explaining school expectations in a way that demonstrates the shared concern for the welfare and progress of the child, a working relationship can be established, which often brings with it a strong sense of loyalty and respect.
- The induction meeting is an opportunity to find out as much as possible about the child and what their strengths and interests are and what language or languages they speak and when they started learning English.
- It is important to highlight the expectations of the school from the outset. Many Roma children and families won't be familiar with the requirements of the National Curriculum, may be unfamiliar with the subjects taught and will not be sure what is expected of them. Some Roma children may have had their schooling experiences interrupted or may have never been in school before, and will not have any knowledge of learning or school routines.
- Having to wear a school uniform, completing homework, or going to school regardless of the weather will be new concepts for many families. Making sure the parents/guardians know from the outset, the expected level of attendance at school is important. Getting the

pupil started in a positive way will improve their chances of making good progress.

- An induction DVD and/or welcome packs in the appropriate languages will help explain things to families who don't understand English and may have literacy issues.

“The welcome DVD was great as we could actually see what the school was like and what we needed to do even though we can't speak English.”

A Slovakian Roma Mum

### **Meeting the needs of the EAL Roma child: empathy and patience**

The vast majority of Roma pupils will be EAL learners. EAL refers to a child initially exposed to a language other than English during early development and continues to use their mother tongue language regularly in the home or in their community.

Accurately assessing Roma pupils on their level of English and also knowing what other languages they speak will enable you to make effective personalised provision.

Making sure that Roma pupils can access the national curriculum and engage in a full and integrated school life will depend on their acquisition of the English language.

There are many strategies and resources to support good EAL teaching including an increase in the use of visuals, keyword banks and opportunities for speaking and listening activities.

Above all schools need to understand the emotional and linguistic challenges faced by EAL Roma pupils and how language is acquired. Showing an interest in the Roma child's mother tongue, country of origin, hobbies and interests will help enormously. Moving to a new country is a very emotional process as is learning a new language, making new friends and a new life. It is worth noting that it can take up to 2 years for a newly arrived EAL child to develop functional/social language (BICS-Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) and another 5 years to be fully fluent (CALP-Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency)

Some suggestions would include:

- Introduce the new child to the class, showing interest in their own culture and language
- Find them a 'buddy' same language speaker if possible
- Give the pupil some helpful induction information, to make them as comfortable as possible in the new environment
- Sit them close to the teacher and provide basic classroom material
- Involve them in every activity as they will learn some skills from observing other children
- Give them some sort of visual prompts to help them when faced with social situations
- Regular targeted interventions in small groups (ideally 30 minutes every day) for focussed language work
- Lots of opportunities to listen to "chatty" children.



"Learning English can be hard, I felt lonely and scared at first but now I am improving and I am making more friends."

Year 8 Hungarian Roma pupil.

### **A culturally inclusive and flexible learning environment**

The possibility of previous negative school experiences means that it is essential to make your classroom environment positive and affirming. Various developmental, social, religious, ethnic, cultural and linguistic influences affect how children and young people develop.

- Use of appropriate resources and displays that reflect the cultures of all children including those within the Roma communities can help challenge myths surrounding them and serve to promote community cohesion. An inclusive curriculum prepares all pupils for life in a diverse society.
- Some Roma pupils may experience conflicting expectations between home and school. Secondary age pupils may perceive school to be a limiting environment compared to home, where they are treated as adults from puberty. Risk of low attendance and drop out at KS3-4 is real and particular attention needs to be paid to raising aspirations and offering flexible responses to vocational courses.
- Providing appropriate conditions for homework in school can be very helpful if it is not possible for the pupil to complete work at home due to limited space and access to ICT.



“Learning can be fun especially when you can use your skills like music and sport.”

Year 9 Czech Roma boy

### **Developing effective outreach work: essential home-school liaison**

Establishing effective outreach practices to communicate with Roma parents and maintain a positive relationship of trust is essential. Developing a face to face relationship with the parents and clearly demonstrating that the welfare and attainment of their child is of the utmost importance to the school will foster positive relations.

- If Roma parents seem distant and only make contact with the school if they have a complaint or problem it may be because they feel uncomfortable in the school environment. Ignoring letters or written invitations to discuss their child's progress could be misinterpreted as a lack of interest when lack of English or general literacy may be the underlying issue. Use of an interpreter or a bilingual service for interpreting or translation may be needed in this context.
- Communicating any problems or concerns with parents as soon as possible after the event and not forgetting to communicate good news and success is important. Use of an interpreter or a bilingual service for interpreting or translation may be needed in this context.
- It is important to think very carefully about the ways in which information is shared such as reports, permission requests, positive feedback and concerns. Even verbal forms of communication can be intimidating if jargon or acronyms are used.

- Some parents may have concerns about participation in school trips and off-site education. Being flexible and taking the time to talk and reassure parents to allay fears will encourage wider participation.
- Sex education may also be an issue for some parents and should be discussed prior to teaching.



“My parents were so proud of me when I got the award from the Mayor, nothing like that had happened to me before.”

Year 7 Roma Girl with significantly improved attendance

## Empowering the community

As with any ethnic minority group, allowing the children, young people and adults to have a voice and contribute to school life in some way can prove invaluable. Welcoming Roma volunteers into school can really help break down barriers and improve relationships with school and home and other parents in the local community. Many Roma people have very useful language skills and can be a valuable employee.

- Encourage parents to come into school/participate in lessons
- Create opportunities for informal coffee mornings to get to know parents
- Encourage Roma representation on your school council/governing body
- Create Roma community liaison officers
- Showcase good news and seek to create positive Roma role models

“When I was asked to help out at the school, I felt honoured and happy. I wanted to help my community and help them understand how important education is.”

Czech Roma A level student

## Working effectively in a multi-agency context

Some Roma families can face difficulties when settling into life in the UK and schools need to be aware of the impact these difficulties can have on attendance and attainment at school. Newly arrived families can face multi-occupancy in overcrowded poor housing dwellings with other family members for long periods of time. Families do not choose to live this way but are forced to pool their resources to maintain a roof over their heads. Serious financial difficulties can lead to real abject poverty and a reliance on charity and food banks for some families too. On top of this, understanding the processes in terms of applying for a school place for the children, registering with a GP and dentist can be major challenges due to language barriers and prior experiences.

- Once the children are in school, the schools themselves can become a real source of support and help for these families who are trying to navigate through various systems.
- If schools have strong links with wider services/agencies this can help enormously and result in better outcomes for all.
- Drop-in sessions for the families can be highly successful, especially if they are supported by a community member. This way families can be correctly signposted to the relevant agencies and a relationship of support and trust will develop.
- Useful links could be your local authority Ethnic Minority Achievement Service or Traveller Education team, Citizens Advice Bureau and welfare rights officers, tenancy support workers, youth service, local neighbourhood teams and voluntary sector organisations.



The role of schools and teachers is fundamental in breaking the cycle of poor educational outcomes for Roma children across Europe. By having a greater understanding of these new Roma communities in the UK and by a concerted effort by schools, parents and the young people themselves, a brighter future awaits and one where Every child really does matter.

I brought my family to England for a better life, it doesn't matter how many qualifications you get in the Czech Republic if you are Roma you will not get a fair chance. Here we have a fair chance and it is important that we don't waste it.

Roma father

## Thanks

Special thanks to NATT+ Roma Support Group who helped to produce this guidance and in particular the Roma children and families for their valuable contributions

## Resources and further information

National Association of Teachers of Travellers and other Professionals [www.natt.org.uk](http://www.natt.org.uk)

Roma Support Group  
[www.romasupport.org](http://www.romasupport.org)

National Association for Language Development in the Curriculum  
[www.naldic.org.uk](http://www.naldic.org.uk)

Northern Association of Support Services for Equality and Achievement.  
[www.nassea.org.uk](http://www.nassea.org.uk)

Collaborative Learning  
[www.collabortaivelearning.org](http://www.collabortaivelearning.org)

OFSTED Guidance  
Inspecting Inequalities Briefing April 2014  
English as an additional language Briefing for section 5 Inspection  
[www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/inclusionandlearnersupport/eal/a0076755/english-as-an-additional-language](http://www.education.gov.uk/schools/pupilsupport/inclusionandlearnersupport/eal/a0076755/english-as-an-additional-language).  
[www.goodpractice.ofsted.gov.uk/](http://www.goodpractice.ofsted.gov.uk/).

Many excellent National Strategies archived documents can be found on NATT+ and Naldic websites such as:  
Supporting children learning English as an additional language-  
Guidance for practitioners in the Early Years Foundation Stage  
2007

Aiming High-Meeting the needs of newly arrived learners of English  
as an additional language 2005