

In this special, one-off September 2014 edition of the newsletter, we are highlighting only one item; the potentially massive changes that might affect Roma communities throughout the UK as a result of the government's proposals to change welfare benefits for all EU migrants.

A number of organisations have supported this "call for evidence". In July, the All Party Parliamentary Group for Gypsy, Roma & Travellers also supported this "call for evidence" to help them have a better understanding of how these changes are directly affecting Roma families, and communities, and local neighbourhoods and local public services.

The (then) government Minister of State for Faith & Communities, Baroness Warsi, said on 2 April 2014 "with a significant number of Roma living in the UK, the better treatment of Roma people must therefore now start on our doorstep". The outcome of this "call for evidence" might help us see what is happening on our doorsteps.



[September 2014 newsletter](#)

[Welcome from Roma Support Group](#)

Welcome to the fifth edition. We want to bring you information, reflections, arguments and discussion about the issues that face Roma communities in the UK. The Roma Support Group has developed over the last fifteen years into a major service agency working for and with Roma communities, mainly in London. We run advice and advocacy sessions; education support programmes (including homework support) for children and families; a Roma Support and Engagement Programme (including tailored staff training and development); and an arts and culture programme. Recently, RSG has been able to develop its work on developing Roma advocacy and mediation,

community engagement and development (again principally in London) and also into policy development and information provision. This e-bulletin is one manifestation of these recent developments.

Contact us via:

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CALL FOR EVIDENCE

RECENT CHANGES IN BENEFIT ENTITLEMENT AND ACCESS TO BENEFITS FOR ROMA MIGRANTS LIVING IN THE UK

Background

Roma migrants from East & Central European countries have been moving to settle and work in the UK for well over two decades. Initially, some families secured refugee status in the 1990s after experiencing the reality of anti-Roma attacks. Many more have moved after 2004, both to seek work for themselves and education for their families, and to evade the harsh experiences of continuing exclusion and hostility. The single European Union allows everyone to move to exercise their rights as workers, and so to support their families; but the European Union does not allow EU citizens to seek asylum from persecution in EU member states. A recent report conservatively estimated that there are just over 200,000 Roma citizens living in the UK.

At the end of 2013, the Prime Minister indicated that the government intends to restrict access to welfare benefits for EU migrants^[1]. Subsequently, a range of policy announcements of amendments and administrative changes have been made - summarised in the government press release of 8 April 2014 "*Further curbs to migrant access to benefits announced*"^[2]. Perhaps the most significant of the eight changes that have been announced are:

- Removing the eligibility to housing benefit (HB) for EU migrants who claim job seekers allowance (JSA) as 'job seekers'. This will primarily affect newly arrived EU migrants who have a right to reside as a jobseeker only; and for instance, do not have retained worker status or the right to reside as a family member
- Limiting receipt of JSA as 'job seekers' for EU migrants to six months; and a recent proposal to reduce this further to three months. This will

affect newly arrived EU migrants. They would have to provide 'compelling evidence' that they have a genuine chance of finding work after six months to continue to be eligible to claim. But the rights to retain 'worker status' (for more established migrants) is also time limited

- Changing the definition of an EU migrant who is not working, so that it is more difficult to be defined as a 'worker' and as a retained worker. You will have to have been working for at least three months, earning above the NI threshold (£153 per week) in work that is deemed to be "genuine and effective".
- Introducing checks at Job Centres on proficiency in English

Potential impact on Roma communities

Speaking on behalf the government in a recent House of Lords debate, Baroness Warsi said that,

The Government share the deep concern...about the situation of Roma in many parts of Europe. We deplore the fact that in many European states Roma live in deep poverty and are routinely subject to discrimination and racism. I agree...that there is a difference between what we see in some countries on mainland Europe and here in the UK. Despite our positive record, though, I agree that we could do more.

...the sad fact remains that prejudice and discrimination continue to follow Roma communities throughout Europe. With a significant number of Roma living in the UK, the better treatment of the Roma people must therefore start on our own doorstep.

I hope that noble Lords will be left today with the clear impression that, at home and abroad, we are working to improve the lives of Roma. I reassure all noble Lords that the persecution of minority communities is not, and will not be, tolerated by this Government. That includes the continued marginalisation and exclusion of Roma people. We want to see Roma families enjoy the same education and healthcare opportunities that are afforded to all European citizens, particularly those within our own British communities. [3](our emphasis).

The government accepts that the situation faced by Roma communities, both in the UK and in other EU member states, is different from other EU migrants. These differences include:

- The frequent structural exclusion experienced by Roma communities in the countries of origin
- Relatedly, a weaker connection with formal employment and education structures than other EU migrants
- Hence, a greater 'gap' for some Roma migrants with the UK labour market, than other EU migrants
- A strong culture of family support within the Roma communities, and hence a family migration, rather than a single adult migration
- Less likelihood of having pre-existing competence in skills in English language, compared to other EU migrants

In the DWP's equality assessment of the changes in eligibility of job seekers to housing benefit, it states a significantly higher proportion of (all) recent migrants are classified as of ethnic minority origin. It continues,

*Further, it is likely that the ethnicity breakdown of European migrants will be different to those of migrants from other continents. Therefore, in using all foreign migrants to the UK as a proxy for the potentially affected group, it is unclear whether we have an accurate portrayal of the extent to which ethnic minorities will be affected by the measure, and so these results should be treated with some caution.**[4]***

The changes that have been announced have only been applied since 1 January 2014, and the most recent changes are only effective from 1 July 2014. The initial impact of these changes is only being witnessed now. The Social Security Advisory Committee (SSAC) recently conducted a consultation on the regulations which removed access of EU job seekers to housing benefit. The Secretary of State (Ian Duncan Smith) has responded to the findings of the SSAC by saying that he will respond more fully in the early autumn which will allow "...the results from the Department's research with local authorities to be included in the response". This would also indicate the pressing need for evidence to be sourced - beyond local authorities - which might look at any differential impact that these changes might have on Roma communities in the UK.

This call for evidence is supported by the following organisations:

- Roma Support Group, London
- Aire Centre
- Europa Roma
- Travellers Movement

- London Gypsy & Traveller Unit
- East European Advice Centre, London
- Roma Community Centre, Derby
- Rightsnet.org

Call for evidence

As well as the listed voluntary and community organisations supporting this call for evidence, recently, the All Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Gypsy, Roma & Travellers has supported this call, to enable a report to be prepared for this APPG early in 2015.

We would ask that all evidence is submitted in writing **by 30 November 2014**.

If your evidence includes examples or case studies with individuals, say if you would prefer for the evidence to be anonymous if published.

Try and limit yourself to four sides, approximately 2,000 words.

We would like the evidence to be submitted according to the following four headings:

1. ***What are the impacts of the changes in eligibility to housing benefit on Roma households?***
2. ***What are the impacts of the limitation of JSA to 3/6 months for Roma job seekers?***
3. ***What are the impacts of the changing definition of a worker for Roma job seekers?***
4. ***What are the impacts of the English language proficiency tests at Job Centres for Roma households?***

We recognise that there might be other issues that affect Roma and EU migrants' access to benefits which you think might be relevant. Please include reference to them if necessary. These include:

- Administrative delays within particularly the DWP and HMRC

- The impact of other recent benefit changes e.g. benefit cap
- Changes to Personal Independence Payments, and the new associated residence rules

We would hope that you will be able to provide answers that are based on casework or particular examples of families or individuals with whom you are working.

We would particularly value your assessment of the impact of these changes on local neighbourhoods, and local neighbourhood services.

Finally, we would think that you might be able to make an assessment of the impact of these changes on other EU migrants/migrant communities that you might work with who are non-Roma.

Please send your evidence to andy@romasupportgroup.org.uk. We will keep everyone informed on the process subsequently.

[1] David Cameron, *“Free movement within Europe need to be less free”*, Financial Times, 26 November 2013, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/add36222-56be-11e3-ab12-00144feabdc0.html?siteedition=uk#axzz38NbamTq4>

[2] <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/further-curbs-to-migrant-access-to-benefits-announced>

[3] <http://www.theyworkforyou.com/lords/?id=2014-04-02a.976.0>

[4] https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/322808/equality-analysis-eea-jobseekers.pdf