

# **THE ROMA COMMUNITY**

in Northern Ireland and housing:  
A SCOPING REVIEW



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# Contents

<b>Acknowledgements.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Summary .....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.0 Introduction .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>2.0 Definitions: ‘Roma’ in the UK and EU.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>3.0 International Context: EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS).....</b>	<b>11</b>
3.1 UK and devolved governments’ response to the NRIS .....	11
3.2 A Roma Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland?.....	13
<b>4.0 Roma in the UK: History and Housing .....</b>	<b>15</b>
4.1 EU expansion and Roma migration to the UK.....	15
4.2 Settlement patterns and living arrangements.....	15
4.3 Access to housing.....	17
4.4 Migrants to the UK and the private rented sector .....	17
4.5 Brexit and the Roma .....	18
<b>5.0 Policy and legal context: Northern Ireland .....</b>	<b>21</b>
5.1 Draft Programme for Government/Outcomes Delivery Framework.....	21
5.2 Racial Equality and Race Relations.....	22
5.3 Social housing eligibility .....	23
5.4 Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) .....	26
5.5 Migrants and Housing Benefit .....	30
<b>6.0 Roma in Northern Ireland.....</b>	<b>32</b>
6.1 Migrants in Northern Ireland .....	32
6.2 Number and location of Roma in Northern Ireland.....	32
6.3 Housing and the Roma Community in Northern Ireland .....	34
6.4 Housing issues in Belfast.....	36
<b>7.0 Conclusions .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>41</b>

## Summary

**In light of the anecdotal evidence about the growth of the Roma Community in Northern Ireland in recent years, the Housing Executive identified a need for an initial scoping study in relation to this group, the findings of which are outlined in this short report. The main aims of the study were to:**

- **Draw together existing research findings;**
- **Set out the context of the Roma Community's housing eligibility, choice and opportunity in Northern Ireland;**
- **Collate any available information on the location and estimated numbers of Roma households living in the region; and**
- **Examine any issues particular to Northern Ireland.**

## Findings of existing research/literature

It is thought that the Roma people originated in the Punjab region of North West India, leaving due to war and economic hardship and arriving in Europe during the thirteenth century. Modern-day Roma people originate from different Member States across Europe and are not a homogenous group. They have different linguistic and cultural roots and even those who come from the same State may therefore not share the same identity.

In 2011, the European Union published a Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, requiring all member states to develop strategies tailored to the needs of the Roma population in their country for the period to 2020. The UK Government submitted a document outlining the legal framework in the UK and approaches adopted by central government and the devolved administrations. At the time of writing, only the Welsh Government had produced an agreed framework for action, as part of its *Enabling Gypsies, Roma and Travellers* plan.

EU expansion has led to freedom of movement within EU borders for citizens of Central and Eastern European states, including Roma. However, low levels of self-ascription and confusion over categorisation mean that estimates of the number of Roma migrants in the UK are imprecise at best. Research suggests that Roma from a specific town or region in their country of origin have tended to settle together in the same neighbourhoods, towns and cities in the UK. Their attempts to maintain the lifestyles associated with their culture can set them apart from 'mainstream' communities and lead to discrimination and tensions.

The location of Roma in particular areas is generally influenced by a need to find low cost rented accommodation. As a result, Roma often live in poor and deprived areas. For a number of reasons including shortages in social housing and high levels of illiteracy and associated difficulties with bureaucratic processes, they tend to live in the private rented sector, often experiencing high rents and sub-standard conditions, and without tenancy agreements. Research carried out in Britain found many respondents living in overcrowded conditions alongside other members of their extended family.

## **Context of the Roma Community's housing eligibility, choice and opportunity in Northern Ireland**

One of the 12 outcomes included in the Outcomes Delivery Plan published by the Executive Office for 2018/19 was that 'We are a shared, welcoming and confident society that respects diversity'. Delivery of this draft Programme for Government outcome is supported by the T:BUC strategy and the OFMDFM Racial Equality Strategy and associated Minority Ethnic Development Fund. The Racial Equality Strategy recognises that there may be a need to develop and implement specific programmes of work to address challenges facing particular groups such as the Roma.

In Northern Ireland, the Housing Selection Scheme represents a single gateway into social housing let on a permanent basis, whether owned or managed by the Housing Executive or any of the housing associations. In the case of persons from abroad, eligibility for housing or homeless assistance must be established. European Economic Area (EEA) Nationals have rights to enter and reside in the UK but, in order to be eligible for homeless assistance or an allocation of housing, they must have extended right to reside as a worker or self-employed person. While members of the Roma community living in Northern Ireland who are citizens of EEA countries may be eligible to apply for social housing, in practice the outcome of the application will depend on their ability to provide the necessary evidence and documentation to confirm their right of residency status.

As in other parts of the UK, evidence suggests that, for cultural reasons and to minimise costs, Roma families who have located in Northern Ireland tend to live in extended family groups in privately rented accommodation. The Houses in Multiple Occupation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 came into effect from 1 April 2019, bringing updated regulations and a new licensing scheme, and transferring responsibility for HMOs from the Housing Executive to local councils. Irrespective of the number of occupants, whether or not dwellings are classified as HMOs will depend on the relationship between occupants.

Whether they rent from a social or private landlord, tenants must be able to demonstrate that they are habitually resident in Northern Ireland in order to be able to apply for help with their housing costs.

## **Collate any available information on the location and estimated numbers of Roma households living in the region**

The combined impact of a general reluctance among the Roma Community to declare their ethnicity and the limitations of the current monitoring framework means that it is difficult to make reliable estimates of the number of Roma people and households in Northern Ireland on the basis of official statistics or administrative data. Research suggests that the number of Roma living in the region increased from around 500 in 2010 to upwards of 2,500 in 2016. Evidence collected by researchers and support groups indicates that Roma living in Northern Ireland are mainly of Romanian, Hungarian, Slovakian and Czech origin. The greatest concentration of families is thought to be located in Belfast (particularly at locations in the South and East of the city including the Holylands, Lower Ormeau and Botanic), but there are also Roma communities in other areas including Ballymena, Craigavon, Newtownhamilton and Keady.

The members of the Roma Community living in Northern Ireland generally work in the informal sector, selling flowers, magazines and newspapers or working as car wash attendants. It is thought that some still return to their country of origin for seasonal work, so numbers in Northern Ireland may vary during the year.

Various research projects have indicated that relatively high proportions of migrant workers and people from ethnic minorities in Northern Ireland tend to be housed in the private rented sector. These groups can experience overcrowding, unaffordable rents and poor property and tenancy management by landlords. Access to the private rented sector is an important issue for migrant communities, particularly those from Central and Eastern Europe. South Belfast, where there are concentrations of Roma families, tends to be the most expensive market for rental accommodation in Northern Ireland.

Since 2011, the Housing Executive has collated information on the level of contact with members of the Roma Community at its offices throughout Northern Ireland. In 2017, the highest number of visits (100) was to the Waterloo Place office in Derry/Londonderry. The main reasons for visiting were: applying for social housing; presenting as homeless; and seeking general advice on housing/homelessness.

In 2009, more than 100 members of Roma families were forced from their homes in Belfast after a sustained period of racist attacks and some left Northern Ireland permanently. The events prompted a multi-agency response. A monitoring group continues to meet monthly to prevent and resolve issues with, and within, the Roma Community.

## **Examine any issues particular to Northern Ireland**

Relatively speaking, patterns of migration by members of the Roma Community to Northern Ireland, and their living circumstances, have been broadly similar to trends and outcomes in other parts of the UK. The issues and challenges faced by Roma people have been recognised at EU level, and are not particular to the UK or Northern Ireland. However, it has been noted that Northern Ireland's legacy of residential segregation may have affected some migrants' housing choices, possibly including those of the Roma Community.

## **Conclusions**

It will be important to continue to monitor the type and level of contact with members of the Roma Community throughout Northern Ireland on housing matters, to gain a clearer picture of housing issues and challenges and ensure that, where relevant, both landlords and tenants are aware of their rights and responsibilities.

While securing engagement and participation may present difficulties, the proposal to add a tick-box category for Roma to the ethnic group question in the 2021 Northern Ireland Census is a welcome first step towards providing official baseline information on the characteristics and circumstances of this community in Northern Ireland. More broadly, ongoing local level engagement by statutory and

voluntary organisations will be key in building relationships and trust in order to facilitate good relations and ensure that members of the Roma Community are able to avail of appropriate advice, assistance and services on a range of issues, including housing.



## 1.0 Introduction

In recent years Northern Ireland has witnessed a rapid diversification of its usually resident population. According to the 2011 Census, the number of all usual residents in Northern Ireland was 1,810,863 (NISRA, 2012) and the proportion of the population accounted for by Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups had more than doubled, from 0.8% in 2001 to 1.8% (32,400) in 2011. In addition, the 2011 Census indicated that English was not the first language for 3.1% of the population in Northern Ireland.

This diversification has included a growing number of people from the Roma community, who began arriving in Northern Ireland shortly after Romania's accession to the European Union (EU) in 2007 allowed Romanian citizens to travel freely between Member States. In January 2014, a change came into effect which gave Romanian and Bulgarian nationals the same rights to live and work in the UK as other EEA nationals. During 2014 and 2015 migration from Romania rose substantially, with around 1,000 members of the Roma community – mostly from Romania – thought to be living in Northern Ireland at that time, mainly in South Belfast.

In light of the anecdotal evidence about the growth of the Roma Community in Northern in recent years, the Housing Executive identified a need for an initial scoping study in relation to this group, the findings of which are outlined in this short report. The main aims of the study were to:

- draw together existing research findings;
- set out the context on the Roma Community's housing eligibility, choice and opportunity in Northern Ireland;
- collate any available information on the location and estimated numbers of Roma households living in the region; and
- examine any issues particular to Northern Ireland.

This work was carried out as part of the Housing Executive's commitment to ensure that consideration of equality issues is central to housing policy formulation and decision-making, and to provide information for other public bodies, service providers and practitioners on the needs of this relatively new community in Northern Ireland.

## 2.0 Definitions: 'Roma' in the UK and EU

The Roma in the UK are defined to be Romani people migrating predominantly since the mid-1990s, either those seeking asylum from persecution in mainland European countries or, since 2004, as European citizens exercising their right of movement in search of work. Matras (2015:16) discusses how Rom or Roma is now seen as the 'genuine, recognised and politically correct' name for people of Romani heritage. Academic discussions have centred upon whether Roma identity is defined as a common language or shared cultural norms. A common language is significant amongst Roma communities and it is a clear indicator of one's ethnicity, yet not all Roma groups speak Romani (Tohani, 2017). Within the UK there is often confusion in the terminology between UK Roma and other 'Romani' groups (Craig, 2011). The Council of Europe uses the term 'Roma and Travellers' to encompass a wide range of groups. It is thought that the Roma people originated in the Punjab region of North West India, leaving due to war and economic hardship and arriving in Europe during the thirteenth century (Barany, 2002).

Roma people are not a homogeneous group, as they originate from different Member States across Europe and so have different linguistic and cultural roots. Even when the Roma arrive from a single EU Member State they do not necessarily share the same identity. The Roma, though not a *national* group, is an identified *racial* group under the terms of the Race Relations Amendment Act 2000 and the Equality Act 2010, and therefore constitute protected legitimate ethnic minority communities. According to Fremlova and Amstead (2011) a number of Roma from Eastern Europe, particularly from the Czech Republic, Poland, Romania and Slovakia, initially came to the UK in the 1990s seeking asylum.

It has been suggested that the Roma are the largest ethnic minority in Europe, with a population of over 10 million people. However, it is difficult to know how many 'Roma' people live in the UK due to lack of national monitoring data. Historically, Roma migrants to the UK were often obliged to select the 'white other' category. Brown et al (2013:6) confirm that there 'currently exists an inadequate understanding of the size of the migrant population residing in the UK'. The EU uses the word 'Roma' as an umbrella term in European policy to include a wide range of communities. Under this broad definition a study by the University of Salford (Brown et al, 2013) indicated that there were close to 200,000 Roma in the UK, which is believed to be a significant undercount as many will not identify their ethnicity due to fear of racism and discrimination. Following the definition of 'Roma' provided by the Council of Europe, which aimed to be inclusive of many similar groupings across the EU, 'Roma' communities who migrated to the UK have been categorised along with indigenous ethnic groups, such as Irish Travellers (Brown et al, 2016).

Roma people originate from different Member States across Europe and are not a homogeneous group. They have different linguistic and cultural roots and even those who come from the same State may therefore not share the same identity.

## 3.0 International Context: EU Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies (NRIS)

Across Europe the 'Roma' are some of the most disadvantaged people, frequently living in extreme poverty and often with limited access to education, healthcare and decent housing (Lane et al, 2014). In 2010 the Council of Europe issued the Strasburg Declaration on 'Roma', which recognised the fact that Roma across Europe continued to be 'socially and economically marginalised'. Then in April 2011 the EU published a Framework for National 'Roma' Integration Strategies (NRIS) up to 2020, which was adopted by all of the European Union members. All Member States were required to develop their own Roma integration strategies tailored to meet the needs of the Roma population in their country. Member States agreed to prepare strategic documents to meet four key EU Roma goals: access to education, employment, healthcare and housing (Brown et al, 2013). The EU Framework for National Integration Strategies up to 2020 acknowledged that the EU had previously 'made several proposals for Member States to promote the social and economic integration of Roma' but admitted that despite the incorporation of anti-discrimination directives into national legal codes 'little has changed in the day to day situation of most Roma' and that 'strong and proportionate measures are still not yet in place' (EC, 2011:3).

### 3.1 UK and devolved governments' response to the NRIS

The UK's submission to the call comprised a document outlining both the legal framework in the UK in respect of the Roma and the approaches adopted by the UK government, as well as those of the devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The content of the document placed little attention on migrant Roma arriving from Central and Eastern Europe.

Responsibility for preparing the UK government's NRIS was assumed by the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). The DCLG report uses the terms 'Roma' and 'Migrant Roma' to describe people of Roma origin, the majority of whom have migrated from Central and Eastern Europe to the UK since the 1990s. The latest EU assessment of the UK's NRIS, published in June 2016, concluded that the UK's mainstream policies were not working for Roma, as little impact on improving their situation was evident (<https://nationalromanetwork.wordpress.com/nris>). A leading Roma organisation in the UK, Roma Support Group, stated in their briefing note produced in July 2016 that more action was needed to put pressure on various government departments to make a commitment to meeting the objectives of Roma integration.

These views were echoed by the House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee (2019), which noted that:

*The historical approach that the UK Government has taken to the EU Roma Framework is lacking in focus and has yielded little to no positive outcomes for Roma communities. The*

*pilot projects being run through the Controlling Migration Fund<sup>1</sup> are a welcome development. However, the Government must properly evaluate all the pilots and explicitly state how each successful project will be rolled out. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should produce a full final report of all the projects and include clear decisions on which pilots were unsuccessful and should end and which were successful. The Ministry should commit to implementing any successful projects nationally.*

*(House of Commons Women and Equalities Committee, 2019; 63)*

At the time of writing, there remains no overarching national strategy to promote Roma integration in the UK and the devolved governments have taken different approaches to integration (Lane et al, 2014).

### **Scotland**

Scotland has not approved its own National Roma Integration Strategy, causing weakness in implementing Roma Inclusion priorities (CIS, 2016). However, in September 2013 a report on Mapping of the Roma Community was produced, based on consultation with the 32 Scottish Local Authorities, to provide an evidence base to implement Roma inclusion policies. The majority of councils provided little data, partly due to low numbers, but the study remains the only official scoping of the extent and location of Roma communities and estimated that there were between 4,000 and 5,000 Roma people living in Scotland.

### **Wales**

Wales is the only Executive in the UK that has submitted a framework for action as opposed to a summary of policies and measures already undertaken. The Welsh Framework for Action was initially developed specifically for the indigenous Roma and Traveller population in Wales and did not address emerging issues as a result of migrant Roma from Bulgaria and Romania settled into Wales. The document, *'Travelling to a Better Future': Gypsy and Traveller Framework for Action and Delivery Plan* (2011), was the first of its kind to be published in the UK and set out policy direction for the Welsh government and its partners, focusing on areas such as accommodation, education, training and health. This document was replaced in June 2018 by the *Enabling Gypsies, Roma and Travellers* plan (Welsh Government, 2018), which focuses on devolved issues that the Welsh government can influence.

The updated plan includes Romani Gypsies, Irish Travellers, New Travellers and, recognising the more recent migration from other EU Member States, Migrant Roma. It thus covers a much wider range of groups than we have focused on in the present scoping study, and recognises that these communities each have distinct cultures and face different challenges. Based on issues raised during the consultation process that informed the plan, the Welsh Government has indicated that a number of key issues will be prioritised, and that it will:

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<sup>1</sup> The Controlling Migration Fund, which was designed to support local areas facing pressures linked to recent immigration, was made available for the four-year period 2016/17-2019/20. The Fund has two aspects: a **Local service impacts fund** (£100 million) to help English local authorities and their communities experiencing high and unexpected volumes of immigration to ease pressures on local services; and an **Enforcement fund** (£40 million) to direct enforcement action against people in the UK illegally in order to reduce the pressure on local areas.

- challenge engrained health and education outcomes which prevent these communities from fulfilling their potential;
- support Gypsies, Roma and Travellers to access the labour market;
- provide advice and advocacy to Gypsies, Roma and Travellers who are encountering discrimination or hate crime;
- improve information sharing, including in relation to rights and entitlements; and
- foster good relations between Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities and wider society.

The Plan sets out a range of actions under four themes: ‘Prosperous and Secure’, ‘Healthy and Active’, ‘Ambitious and Learning’ and ‘United and Connected’. Accommodation-related actions are mainly directed towards the needs and circumstances of the Gypsy and Traveller communities, although the Welsh Government has committed to:

- work with local authorities and others to ensure the Supporting People programme supports Gypsies, *Roma* and Travellers to maintain their accommodation [emphasis added];
- monitor the effect of recent welfare reforms, including the benefit cap and expansion of the Universal Credit ‘full’ service...to identify barriers for Gypsy, *Roma* and Travellers [emphasis added]; and
- ensure these communities are able to benefit from Credit Unions, the Discretionary Assistance Fund, debt advice and money guidance and other services.

More generally, the Welsh Plan also notes the need to:

- promote increased confidence of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller community members to ascribe their ethnicity on official data collections to ensure needs can be properly understood and addressed;
- ensure the provision of high quality, accessible advice, information and advocacy services to enable Gypsies, Roma and Travellers to exercise their rights and make informed choices;
- research the effectiveness of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller peer advocates to support better information sharing within communities; and
- ensure EU Citizens, including Roma and Irish-born Travellers, are supported to understand their rights and obligations in relation to the UK Government’s EU Withdrawal arrangements.

### **3.2 A Roma Inclusion Strategy for Northern Ireland?**

Northern Ireland has not developed its own National Roma Integration Strategy, despite calls from a range of stakeholders for a strategic group to be established. A conference organised by the Community Foundation for Northern Ireland (CFNI) in June 2014 discussed the case for a specific inclusion strategy for the Roma communities in Northern Ireland. Les Allamby, CFNI Trustee and Director of the Law Centre NI, argued that recent attacks on Roma people had strengthened the need for urgent legislative reforms as hostile attitudes and negative stereotyping of the Roma in Northern Ireland had led to high levels of marginalisation, poverty and discrimination. Although a Roma Inclusion Strategy exists at the UK level, there is a view that the issues faced by the Roma in Northern Ireland require a local response. Allamby states:

*“It only makes sense that the Northern Ireland Assembly should build strong legislative mechanisms to protect the local Roma community which is routinely subjected to verbal and physical abuse and faces multiple discrimination, from barriers in accessing schools, housing and healthcare to restricted employment opportunities.” (CFNI, 2014)*

### **International Context: EU Framework and UK Response – Key Points**

In 2011 the European Union published a Framework for National Roma Integration Strategies, requiring all member states to develop strategies tailored to the needs of the Roma population in their country for the period to 2020.

The UK Government submitted a document outlining the legal framework in the UK and approaches adopted by central government and the devolved administrations.

At the time of writing, there remains no overarching national strategy to promote Roma Integration in the UK and the devolved governments have taken different approaches to integration.

The Welsh Government is the only UK devolved administration to have submitted a framework for action. Its *Enabling Gypsies, Roma and Travellers* plan sets out policy actions in relation to issues such as health, education, training and employment. Accommodation-related actions included in the plan are mainly directed towards the needs of the Gypsy and Traveller communities.

A number of stakeholders have called for the development of a Roma Integration Strategy for Northern Ireland.

## 4.0 Roma in the UK: History and Housing

### 4.1 EU expansion and Roma migration to the UK

Roma migration to the UK has taken place since 1945. However, since 1989 the number of Roma migrating from Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) has steadily increased (Poole, 2010). During the 1990s and early 2000s a number of Roma came to the UK seeking asylum. In May 2004, ten new countries joined the European Union (EU): Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia and Slovenia. From that date, Cyprus and Malta had full free movement and right to work throughout the EU, while the remaining eight countries (the Central and Eastern European countries referred to as the A8) were subject to certain restrictions. In January 2007 Bulgaria and Romania (referred to as the A2), joined the EU and when Croatia joined in 2013, their citizens became subject to the same EU rules as the A2.

As of 1<sup>st</sup> January 2014, all A2 nationals have the same entitlements as all other EEA nationals. Having entered the UK, individuals have the right to seek work, although they will need a national insurance number, which is provided by the Social Security Agency and depends on proof of identity. In order to qualify for Housing Benefit they need to show that they are “habitually resident” and they have the right to reside in the Common Travel Area (UK, ROI, Isle of Man, Channel Islands). While there were certain restrictions in place, entry into the EU led to freedom of movement within EU borders for citizens of Central and Eastern European states, including Roma.

### 4.2 Settlement patterns and living arrangements

Estimates of the number of Roma in the UK vary considerably (Morris, 2016). A 2013 survey of local authorities indicated that approximately 200,000 Roma migrants were living in the UK, with large populations in London and the North West (Brown et al, 2013). However, due to low levels of self-ascription and confusion over categorisations (such as the distinction between Roma and Travellers and between Roma and Romanians) it is likely that most estimates of Roma migrants in the UK are imprecise at best.

In many cases Roma from a specific town or region in their country of origin settled together in the same neighbourhoods, towns and cities in the UK (Horton & Grayson, 2008). While exact figures are unknown, local authority data suggest that Roma migrants have tended to cluster in particular areas such as Govanhill in Glasgow and Page Hall in Sheffield (Pidd, 2013). The Roma population in the UK includes groups originating from a number of different Central and Eastern European countries, speaking a range of dialects of Romani and practising several different faiths (Morris, 2016). It is their differentiated appearance (dress and other customs) and their attempts to maintain their cultural lifestyles, which sets them apart from mainstream communities and leads to them being subject to discrimination (Staniewicz & Owen, 2009). Media reporting can create further tensions between such groups and mainstream society.

The language that is used within the community is Romani, of which there are a variety of versions or dialects depending on the areas in which the speakers have been brought up (European Dialogue, 2009). As is the case of many of the Eastern European Communities, it is usual for Roma extended

families to share a home and to share the raising of the children. Many of those who have moved to the UK have parents, children and siblings still living in the country from which they migrated who need financial help, and so a share of wages is sent home each month. This often leaves the migrant families managing on very little and they live collectively to cover living costs. Research undertaken for the UK Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCFS – now the Department for Education) found that some families have settled well, but for a large number there are issues with accessing good and adequate accommodation with legal rents and rent agreements and families being moved every six months by the landlords, so affecting work and school opportunities.

Research by the University of Salford (Brown et al, 2013) concerning migrant Roma in the UK has indicated that in many cases Roma tend to be concentrated in small urban areas within wider metropolises. Their location in particular areas is influenced by a need to find low cost rented accommodation. As a result Roma are often located in poor and deprived areas and because of the shortage in social housing tend to live in the private rented sector (PRS). A number of respondents in the Salford evaluation highlighted that unscrupulous landlords were charging Roma tenants high rents for low quality and overcrowded accommodation. The study also reported that a number of authorities stated that they were aware of migrant Roma living in their areas that rarely came into contact with the authority in any way. This was due partly to the tendency for migrant Roma to be accommodated in private rented housing and thus have less interaction with local authority services.

When Roma are allocated housing they are often subject to racial harassment. The Commission for Racial Equality (CRE, 2006) noted that these incidents are frequently not reported and that several respondents who took part in research had moved to avoid such intimidation. The Roma community's reliance on private sector housing is due to their high levels of unemployment and reliance on temporary low paid employment. In addition, the prevalence of illiteracy means that Roma have great difficulty in dealing with even minor bureaucratic tasks such as form filling. They experience high rents, sub-standard conditions and non-existent tenancy agreements. This leads to inevitable overcrowding, as families pool what little resources they have in order to survive. More broadly, Allamby et al (2011) also found that migrant workers tend to have little general understanding of their rights and entitlements, which provides a barrier to attaining adequate accommodation.

In its 2019 report on *Tackling Inequalities faced by Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities*, the House of Commons Women and Inequalities Committee (HCWIC) noted that the Government plans to include Roma as an ethnic classification in the 2021 Census. This would be an important development, providing the first official statistics on the number of Roma people living in the UK. However, as the Committee has also noted, the associated challenge is to ensure that community engagement is sufficient to enable robust data collection to inform local policy on Roma issues.

The HCWIC report also acknowledges that minority communities, including Roma, may fear disclosing their ethnicities to public services for fear of discrimination. In order to build trust between data-collectors and the communities, the Committee advocates that the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government should work with grassroots organisations to formulate a wide-ranging campaign to explain the importance of collecting such data and to encourage self-disclosure.



### **4.3 Access to housing**

While it is widely accepted that many Roma, including children and young people, live in poor, sub-standard accommodation – often shared with other families – there is very little research evidence on the accommodation needs or experiences of the Roma communities in the UK. Given the lack of national data, most of the information available about access to and use of housing in the UK comes from a series of small scale qualitative studies of migrant workers, particularly those migrants arriving since the A8 and A2 accessions in 2004 and 2007. Where housing is concerned, the Roma suffer disproportionately high levels of racism, with Roma from Romania and Bulgaria worse off than their counterparts from A8 countries on a number of measures (Craig, 2011). In England the average number of Roma people living in households was 5.9, but in Romanian and Bulgarian Roma households the average was 9.48, suggesting severe overcrowding.

The research evidence available also indicates a variety of other serious housing issues faced by the Roma including high rents, poor quality maintenance and generally high levels of exploitation. Landlords charged high rents, making illegal deductions, and the Roma, often unable to understand formal tenancy agreements or to obtain credit checks, were frequently overcharged (Cemlyn et al, 2009). However, despite clear evidence of housing exploitation, members of the Roma community have argued that it was ‘preferable to what they had experienced in their countries of origin’. (European Dialogue, 2009: 67). Overall, as the UK country report to the European Parliament observed (Cemlyn & Ryder, 2010: 15), there is ‘an urgent need for Roma to be made more aware of their housing rights and... a need for greater scrutiny and challenge to unscrupulous landlords.’ The Roma share this need with many thousands of migrant workers who have become involved with exploitative gang masters and their associates (Wilkinson et al, 2009).

Research carried out by Brown et al (2016) in six locations within the UK (Glasgow, Leicester, London, Oldham, Salford and Sheffield) found many respondents living in large families of between seven and ten people within three-bedroom houses. The ratio between people and space was not seen as a problem by the respondents. For the majority, their experiences had been beset by problems including poor conditions upon moving in and a lack of investment in the maintenance of the properties by the owners. Respondents reported not having their deposits returned when they vacated their property, mostly for spurious reasons. They reported similar levels of poor treatment whether they dealt with a landlord directly or through a letting agency. None of these issues are specific to Roma, as they are faced by many of the households in the UK who live in the private rented sector. However, the research findings give a sense that people from the Roma community were being exploited owing to their more vulnerable position, a lack of English language ability and a lack of awareness of their rights. As a result, Roma often found themselves in particularly disadvantaged situations.

### **4.4 Migrants to the UK and the private rented sector**

Three quarters of all recent migrants to the UK live in the private rented sector. They often have little awareness of their rights and responsibilities as tenants and are more likely to have irregular tenancies or to live in poor condition multi-occupation properties (Perry, 2012). Such conditions can cause tensions between migrants and settled residents in cities and rural areas. As well as

overcrowding associated with Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs), Phillimore et al (2008) pointed out a range of other migrant housing issues; these include:

- high rents, with landlords charging up to £65 for a shared room;
- lack of heating or cooking facilities;
- badly maintained or damp property;
- lack of tenancy agreement; and
- rent increases and refusal to return deposits.

A policy and practice report was commissioned by the Housing and Migration Network (2012) to advance the case for consideration of migrants' use of private renting. The study found that newly arrived migrants often access accommodation through friends or through employers and agents who find them work, avoiding conventional channels like local authorities, mainstream advice agencies or high street agencies. It means that lettings are often informal, possibly without legal agreements, and sometimes involve unconventional arrangements such as housing people in outbuildings or obliging them to share with strangers. If tenants have complaints they may be too intimidated to pursue them and unaware of their rights and/or of agencies that could help them.

The literature makes reference to a range of issues such as poverty, poor housing conditions and a lack of basic amenities as contributory factors to ill health among Roma populations across Europe (Brown et al, 2013 b). A key feature of the focus group discussions among Roma respondents in Brown et al's research was a lack of affordable accommodation, with respondents living in overcrowded conditions alongside other members of their extended family. A desire to access social housing in the future was often expressed by Roma respondents.

## **4.5 Brexit and the Roma**

Roma migrants in the UK are in a state of deep insecurity following the vote to leave the European Union. A report published by the Institute for Public Policy Research (Morris, 2016) into the implications of Brexit for Roma communities found that the group faced many challenges following the referendum on Britain's membership of the EU. The UK government's position (at early summer 2019) is that its draft Withdrawal Agreement with the EU has delivered on its commitment to secure the rights of EU citizens in the UK. Its EU Settlement Scheme, which has been operational since March 2019, outlines how EU citizens can secure their long term status in the UK (ICR, 2018). However, it is still not clear to many EU/EEA citizens how the new category of 'settled status' will impact on them. It is of particular concern that the UK could leave the EU without agreement and without the guarantees in the draft Withdrawal Agreement.

Uncertainty over the Roma's right to remain in the UK, the fact that they have historically been victims of discrimination and prejudice across Europe, and concerns that a large portion of EU funding designed to support them may be stopped, were all cited as factors leaving Roma people particularly vulnerable. Up until now the EU has been a key source of funding for Roma integration. Without this support Roma communities will face greater barriers in accessing employment, education and health care, and local services will be placed under further strain, according to the IPPR report. So far there has been little public discussion about how Brexit will affect Roma communities. One of the report's key recommendations was that local authorities with large Roma

communities take proactive steps to mitigate any negative effects of Brexit on Roma communities. The panel recommends making the case to national government for funding to support Roma communities and collect better data on Roma living in their areas.

An all-party parliamentary group event was held in The House of Lords in July 2018, to discuss the key issues affecting members of the Roma community and other EU nationals applying for settled status in the UK, following Brexit (Brown & Shalice, 2018). Many of these people who have arrived in the UK had been socially excluded in their country of origin. They tend not to feature on electoral registers and may not have identity documents. It will therefore be difficult to get the Roma population to engage with the process by the deadline for applications in December 2020. In addition, the different social backgrounds, languages and literacy skills will be huge obstacles and this will be further compounded by the apprehension that Roma have when dealing with the authorities. Home Office guidance states that applicants will need to prove their nationality through specific forms of evidence, such as a national passport or a national identification card. If applicants do not have these documents and the Home Office does not accept other proof of their nationality, their submission may be refused in the first instance.

Three years on from the IPPR report, many of the same issues were highlighted by the House of Commons Women and Inequalities Committee (2019), which considered how exiting the EU might impact on the Roma community in the UK. The evidence reviewed by the Committee included research by Migration Yorkshire, which found that Roma people were concerned about what the UK's departure from the EU might mean for them; while some were considering leaving the UK permanently, others were keen to stay. The Committee noted that the application process for settled status may disproportionately impact on Roma people for a number of reasons including difficulties with producing written evidence of their lives in the UK. Recognising that the Government has engaged with the Roma Support Group on the practical issues around the Settlement Scheme, the Committee called for clarity on how ongoing support will be provided.

### **Roma in the UK: History and Housing – Key Points**

During the early 1990s and 2000s a number of Roma came to the UK seeking asylum. More recently, EU expansion has led to freedom of movement within EU borders for citizens of Central and Eastern European states, including Roma.

Low levels of self-ascription and confusion over categorisations mean that estimates of the number of Roma migrants in the UK are imprecise at best. Research suggests that Roma from a specific town or region in their country of origin have tended to settle together in the same neighbourhoods, towns and cities in the UK. Their attempts to maintain their cultural lifestyles can set them apart from mainstream communities and lead to discrimination and tensions.

The Government plans to include Roma as an ethnic classification in the 2021 Census. This would be an important development, providing the first official statistics on the number of Roma people living in the UK. However, an associated challenge is to facilitate and encourage participation so that the data collected is robust and can inform local policy on Roma issues.

The location of Roma in particular areas is generally influenced by a need to find low cost rented accommodation. As a result, Roma are often located in poor and deprived areas. For a number of reasons including shortages in social housing and high levels of illiteracy and associated difficulties with bureaucratic processes, they tend to live in the private rented sector, often experiencing high rents and sub-standard conditions and not having tenancy agreements. Research carried out in Britain found many respondents living in overcrowded conditions alongside other members of their extended family.

The UK Government's EU Settlement Scheme is the mechanism through which EU citizens can secure their long term status after the UK leaves the EU. Many of the Roma people who have moved to the UK, having been socially excluded in other states, have no identity documents and, with poor levels of literacy, may struggle to engage with this scheme and provide the necessary proof of identity.

## 5.0 Policy and legal context: Northern Ireland

### 5.1 Draft Programme for Government/Outcomes Delivery Framework

Prior to the collapse of the Northern Ireland Executive in 2017, a draft Programme for Government (PfG) had been prepared and consulted on during 2016. The draft PfG had a focus on achieving 14 high level outcomes of societal wellbeing, which were to be evidenced by a number of indicators. In the continuing absence of an Executive, officials developed the PfG framework to make it as responsive as possible to the needs of people living in Northern Ireland, and an updated draft framework with 12 outcomes (Figure 1) was subsequently published. This framework was used as the basis for an *Outcomes Delivery Plan* (Executive Office, 2018), which set out the actions that departments intended to take over the period 2018/19 to give effect to the previous Executive's stated objectives.

**Figure 1: Updated Draft Programme for Government Framework Outcomes, Northern Ireland, 2018/19**

1. We prosper through a strong, competitive regionally balanced economy	7. We have a safe community where we respect the law and each other
2. We live and work sustainably – protecting the environment	8. We care for others and we help those in need
3. We have a more equal society	9. We are a shared, welcoming and confident society that respects diversity
4. We enjoy long, healthy, active lives	10. We have created a place where people want to live and work, to visit and invest
5. We are an innovative, creative society, where people can fulfil their full potential	11. We connect people and opportunities through our infrastructure
6. We have more people working in better jobs	12. We give our children and young people the best start in life

The Outcomes Delivery Framework does not refer specifically to the Roma Community (or to other distinct groups, such as Travellers), but the various indicators and actions set out in the plan were identified through engagement and discussion with partners and stakeholders as being those which would make the greatest possible difference to the lives and wellbeing of *all* members of Northern Ireland's population. In relation to becoming a more shared and welcoming society that respects

diversity (Outcome 9), the plan notes that promoting tolerance and building resilience will help remove barriers to participation in society for people from a wide range of different backgrounds, including different racial groups. Associated actions include delivery of the *Together: Building a United Community* strategy<sup>2</sup>; implementing actions under the Racial Equality Strategy (see section 5.2) and reviewing the Minority Ethnic Development Fund (section 5.2) to ensure it meets the changing needs of the minority ethnic sector.

## 5.2 Racial Equality and Race Relations

### *Racial Equality Strategy (2015-2025)*

The Racial Equality Strategy (OFMDFM, 2015) sets out a framework for action by government departments to tackle racial inequalities, to eradicate racism and, along with the *Together: Building a United Community* policy, to promote good race relations and social cohesion. A Racial Equality Strategy was published in July 2005 to cover the period 2005-2010. The strategy was the product of extensive consultation with people from a minority ethnic background and wider society during 2003 and 2004. The Strategy acknowledged that a proper system of ethnic monitoring would allow service providers to highlight possible inequalities, investigate any underlying causes and make efforts to remove any disadvantage.

The Racial Equality Strategy for 2015-25 builds on the previous strategy and operates within existing and proposed anti-discrimination legislation in this area, including the Race Relations (NI) Order 1997 and Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998. The Order has been amended on several occasions to comply with European Union law and was amended by the Race Relations Order (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 to give effect to the EU Racial Equality Directive. The Racial Equality Strategy (2015-2025) recognises that there may be a need to develop and implement specific programmes of work to address challenges facing particular groups such as the Roma. In the absence of a functioning Executive, responsibility for ensuring that the Racial Equality Strategy continues to be developed and supported rests with the UK government and the Northern Ireland Secretary Of State.

### *Minority Ethnic Development Fund (MEDF)*

The MEDF was put in place to assist with delivery of the Racial Equality Strategy 2015-2025 by providing support for voluntary and community organisations working with minority ethnic people and/or groups. Its key aims are to:

- Improve equality of service provision by ensuring that people from a minority ethnic background can access and benefit from all public services equally;

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<sup>2</sup> The *Together: Building a United Community* (T:BUC) Strategy, which was published in May 2013, reflects the Executive's commitment to improving community relations and continuing the journey towards a more united and shared society in Northern Ireland. For more information see: [www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/topics/good-relations-and-social-change/together-building-united-community-tbuc](http://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/topics/good-relations-and-social-change/together-building-united-community-tbuc)

- Help eliminate prejudice, racism and hate crime;
- Enable people from minority ethnic backgrounds to participate and be fully represented in all aspects of life and enjoy a sense of ‘belonging’ and
- Recognise and support the rights of people from minority ethnic backgrounds to maintain their culture and traditions in line with human rights norms and pass them on to subsequent generations.

### *Housing Executive Race Relations Policy*

The Housing Executive’s Equality Scheme commits the organisation to the development and implementation of a Race Relations Policy. The aim of the housing Executive’s Race Relations Policy is to ensure that all BME groups in Northern Ireland have access to housing services provided by the Housing Executive. It aims to support the promotion of good relations between and within ethnic groups and communities. The objectives are:

- The prevention of discrimination and the promotion of the right to live peacefully without being harassed on racial grounds.
- The integration of race equality into housing services in line with “fairness and equality” as incorporated in the ‘Targeting Social Need and Promoting Social Inclusion’ initiatives.
- To continue developing the Housing Executive’s ethnic monitoring system and to carry out research to inform future policies with regard to housing needs.
- To provide support for new arrivals to Northern Ireland, such as migrant workers.

Under Section 75 and the Race Relations Order (NI) 1997, public authorities are required to be aware of the need to promote equality of opportunity between people from different racial groups and to have regard to the desirability of good relations. The Housing Executive has implemented procedures for screening policies and for conducting equality impact assessments. It has also carried out inspections of properties in the private rented sector, which have been identified as housing migrant workers and liaising with representative groups where appropriate. This was acknowledged in Bell et al’s (2004) study of migrant workers in Northern Ireland, which recognised that the Housing Executive was proactively addressing issues faced by migrant workers.

### **5.3 Social housing eligibility**

In Northern Ireland, the Housing Selection Scheme represents a single gateway into social housing, let on a permanent basis, whether owned or managed by the Housing Executive or any of the housing associations operating in the region. The *Housing Selection Scheme Guidance Manual* sets out detailed guidance on the interpretation of the rules and operation of the Housing Selection Scheme.

Where persons from abroad are concerned, it must first be established that they are **eligible** for housing or homeless assistance before determining whether they fulfil the *main Application Requirements*, which includes a Connection with Northern Ireland Requirement. For the purposes of determining eligibility, the guidance states that persons from abroad will fall into one of two groups:

1. **European Economic Area (EEA) Nationals** (Figure 2), their EEA National family members/ Non-EEA National family members; and
2. **Persons Subject to Immigration Control (PSIC)** and their family members.

**Figure 2: EEA National Countries for the purposes of the Housing Selection Scheme**

<b>Pre-2004 member states:</b>	Austria Belgium Denmark Finland France	Germany Greece Iceland** (Ireland) Italy	Liechtenstein** Luxembourg Netherlands Norway** Portugal	Spain Sweden Switzerland* (United Kingdom)
<b>Since May 2004:</b>	Cyprus Malta	<b>"A8":</b> Czech Republic Estonia Hungary	Latvia Lithuania Poland	Slovakia Slovenia
<b>Since January 2007</b>	<b>"A2":</b> Bulgaria Romania			
<b>Since July 2013</b>	Croatia			

\* Not an EEA country, but treated as such

\*\* An EEA country, but not an EU member state

All EEA Nationals and their family members have rights to enter and reside in the UK. Broadly, the EEA regulations provide that EEA nationals and their family members have a right of entry into the UK and also an *initial right of residence* for the first three months after their arrival. This initial right of residence is subject only to the requirement that the person holds a valid passport or identity card. However, they are not eligible for homeless assistance or an allocation of housing unless they also have an *extended right to reside* as a 'Qualified Person'.

An EEA 'Qualified Person' will achieve an extended right to reside if they meet one of the criteria described in Figure 3.



**Figure 3: Criteria under which EEA nationals have *extended right to reside* in the UK**

Category	Description
<b>Worker/ Former Worker</b>	<p>An <b>EEA worker</b> is a person with EEA nationality who has a paid job in the UK. Work should be “genuine and effective” and should be confirmed by pay slips and a contract or letter of employment.</p> <p>A person who has satisfied these conditions but is <b>no longer working</b> may not cease to be treated as a ‘worker’ if (s)he is:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(a) Temporarily unable to work as a result of an illness or accident; or</li> <li>(b) Involuntarily unemployed, having been employed in the UK for at least one year, provided (s)he is registered as a jobseeker, entered the UK to seek employment and can provide evidence of seeking employment and having a genuine chance of being engaged in employment. This status generally applies for six months, but may be retained for longer; or</li> <li>(c) A person who has been employed in the UK for less than one year (similar evidence is required as for (b), but the status may only be retained for a maximum of six months); or</li> <li>(d) Involuntarily unemployed and has embarked on vocational training in any field; or</li> <li>(e) On vocational training relating to his/her previous employment field, having voluntarily ceased working.</li> </ul>
<b>Self-employed</b>	<p>A self-employed person should be able to confirm that they are pursuing activity as a self-employed person by providing documents relating to their business, such as:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Invoices</li> <li>• Tax accounts</li> <li>• Utility bills</li> <li>• Bank accounts</li> </ul>
<b>Self-sufficient person</b>	<p>The concept of self-sufficiency is that the person has resources to house themselves and any family. Therefore, while a self-sufficient EEA national has a right to reside in the UK, they are <b>NOT</b> eligible for either an allocation and/or assistance as a homeless applicant.</p>
<b>Student</b>	<p>EEA national students must provide assurances that they have self-sufficient resources to avoid them or their family members become a burden on the social assistance system of the UK. Therefore, whilst an EEA national student has a right to reside in the UK, they are <b>NOT</b> eligible for either an allocation and/or assistance as a homeless applicant.</p>

As well as the EEA Initial Right to Reside and EEA Extended Right to Reside, other circumstances that may influence residency rights – and thus eligibility to apply for social housing in Northern Ireland – include:

- Whether the applicant is the parent/primary carer of a child of an EEA citizen parent (who was recognised as a ‘worker’ in the UK), and the child is currently in education;
- Whether the applicant has Permanent Right of Residence; and
- Whether the applicant may have another right to reside in the UK as a family member of an EEA national.

In each case, further regulations apply and for Roma applicants who are EEA Nationals – as for any EEA applicant – additional investigation would be required to determine the circumstances of the individual case. While Roma people who are citizens of EEA countries may be eligible to apply for social housing in Northern Ireland, in practice the outcome of the application will depend on their ability to provide the necessary evidence and documentation to confirm their right of residency status.

The EU Settlement Scheme was set up in preparation for the UK leaving the EU. It opened on 30 March 2019 and provides two new immigration statuses for EEA nationals (or their family members): *Settled Status* or *Pre-Settled Status*. It is applied for online from the Home Office’s website and, whilst EEA nationals can continue to rely on their EEA rights prior to the UK leaving the EU, the EU Settlement Scheme is potentially a less onerous test than demonstrating eligibility under the existing EEA regulations.

Settled Status will be granted to applicants who can demonstrate five years’ continuous residence in the UK with no requirement for economic activity. It will be the equivalent to Indefinite Leave to Remain for Persons Subject to Immigration Control and will grant eligibility to housing and homeless assistance. Pre-Settled Status will be granted to applicants with less than five years’ residence, granting leave to remain for up to five years (at which point they can apply for Settled Status). Eligibility for housing and homeless assistance will be determined based on the criteria as they currently exist.

To be eligible to apply under the Housing Selection Scheme, all applicants must comply with the application requirements (i.e. they must make an application). In addition, an applicant is eligible if:

- They are a Full Duty Applicant under the Homelessness Legislation; and/or
- They meet both the *Age Requirements* and the *Connection with Northern Ireland requirements* set out in the Housing Selection Scheme.

Applicants other than Full Duty Applicants must demonstrate that they or a member of their household have a Connection with Northern Ireland; this is decided by reference to matters such as the applicant’s normal residence, employment, family associations or other special circumstances. There must be evidence that the applicant or a member of their household has a ‘substantial’ connection with Northern Ireland.

#### **5.4 Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs)**

The evidence from elsewhere in the UK and in Northern Ireland (see Section 6.0) indicates that in order to minimise costs and for cultural reasons, Roma families tend to live in extended family

groups, with higher than average rates of occupancy in terms of persons per dwelling. In certain cases, these living arrangements may technically constitute houses in multiple occupancy.

### *Statutory responsibility for HMOs*

Until 31 March 2019, responsibility for houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) in Northern Ireland rested with the Housing Executive, which managed the Statutory Registration Scheme for HMOs and was responsible for ensuring that these properties met requirements in relation to the overall condition of the dwelling and the number of people living in it. However, from 1 April 2019 the Houses in Multiple Occupation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 came into operation, introducing licensing laws for shared flats and houses and transferring responsibility for HMOs from the Housing Executive to local councils.

### *Licensing Scheme and Definitions*

The new licensing scheme aims to regulate HMOs to ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of occupants and minimise any negative impacts on neighbourhoods. It defines a house in multiple occupation as a building or part of a building that is:

- living accommodation;
- the main residence of three or more people who are from more than two households; and
- rented by at least one of the people living in the accommodation.

From 1 April 2019, all HMO owners must have a licence to continue running properties as HMOs; however, properties previously registered with the Housing Executive automatically transferred to the new licensing scheme, and renewal will be on a rolling basis, five years after the last registration date. On receipt of a licensing application, the Northern Ireland HMO Unit (based within Belfast City Council) will carry out inspections to assess whether the living accommodation is suitable for occupation as an HMO and if the applicant is a 'fit and proper person'<sup>3</sup> and submit a report to councillors to consider. Each local council will make decisions on licence applications for its own electoral area, based on the recommendations of the HMO Unit and any objections received. Councils may grant the licence, grant it with conditions, or refuse (on a number of grounds, including breaching planning control or over-provision of HMOs in the locality in which the HMO is situated).

### *Licensing Conditions*

When a landlord receives a HMO licence it will include some standard conditions that the landlord must meet.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Establishing if the landlord or agent is a suitable person to let privately rented property includes consideration of matters such as any previous criminal convictions and any previous engagement with regulatory services. For more information on the stipulations in relation to 'fit and proper' persons, see Section 10 of Part 2 of the Houses in Multiple Occupation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016:

([www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2016/22/contents](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2016/22/contents) (accessed 15 May 2019))

<sup>4</sup> For more information see *Houses in Multiple Occupation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 Standard Licence Conditions for Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs) in Northern Ireland* [www.belfastcity.gov.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.aspx?IID=32057&SID=27747](http://www.belfastcity.gov.uk/nmsruntime/saveasdialog.aspx?IID=32057&SID=27747) (accessed May 2019)

The standard licence conditions stipulate that all landlords must make sure that the accommodation they provide is safe, of good quality and has suitable facilities for the number of occupants. In particular, landlords must ensure that:

- all safety and maintenance certificates are valid and kept up to date;
- electrics and electrical appliances are safe, maintained and in proper working order at all times;
- stairways and escape routes are maintained free from obstructions;
- a carbon monoxide alarm is installed;
- chimneys and flues are cleaned annually;
- inspection records and tests are maintained;
- furniture is kept in a safe condition and proper working order;
- security arrangements are in place;
- heating is provided throughout living accommodation; and
- the property has an Energy Performance Certificate with a minimum E rating for energy efficiency.

HMO landlords must also give tenants an information pack (in alternative languages or formats, if appropriate) that includes:

- a copy of the HMO licence;
- copies of the current gas certificate, electrical safety report and energy performance certificates;
- advice on reporting anti-social behaviour;
- list of tenant duties and responsibilities;
- contact telephone numbers, including an emergency out of hours contact number; and
- emergency information (which must also be displayed clearly and prominently in the accommodation).

In order to enable landlords to carry out their duties, tenants must:

- allow the landlord or manager access, at all reasonable times, to any occupied room;
- provide them with any relevant information;
- comply with fire safety and litter storage and disposal arrangements in the property;
- not hinder the landlord or manager in performing their duties;
- take reasonable care to avoid damaging anything that the landlord has an obligation to keep in good repair.

### *General management*

Under the 2016 Act, landlords and/or agents must have good management policies and procedures in place to make sure physical standards are maintained, occupiers' rights are respected, and any problems which arise during the period of the licence are effectively addressed. They must also be able to effectively manage issues that may concern neighbours (such as building maintenance, cleaning, noise or disturbance and suitability of the applicant or agent). Councils will consider a landlord's potential capability in managing these issues (or past performance) when deciding whether to grant a licence.

### Overcrowding

When granting a licence, the local council will specify the permitted occupancy on the licence in accordance with Section 7 of the HMO Act. The number of people allowed to live in the property will be based on the number of bedrooms, bathrooms and facilities, and the intended use of the property (for example, if it is intended for older people). The landlord must ensure that the number of occupants specified on the licence is complied with. For the purposes of the legislation, an HMO is overcrowded when the number of persons who sleep in it is such as to contravene the room standard or the space standard (Figure 4).

**Figure 4: Summary of the room standard and space standard for HMOs**

#### **The room standard**

The room standard is contravened when the number of persons who sleep in the HMO and the number of rooms available as sleeping accommodation are such that any person aged 13 or over must sleep in the same room as:

- (a) any person of the opposite sex who is also aged 13 or over, or
- (b) a couple (within the meaning of section 88(3)(a) of the Act)

For this purpose, a room is available as sleeping accommodation if it is of a type normally used in the locality either as a bedroom or as a living room.

#### **The space standard**

The space standard is contravened when the number of persons who sleep in the HMO exceeds the permitted number for that HMO. For this purpose, in determining the number of persons who sleep in an HMO:

- (a) no account is to be taken of a child under the age of one, and
- (b) a child aged 11 or less (but aged at least one) is to be counted as one-half of a person.

To calculate the permitted number for an HMO, account must be taken of the types of the rooms in the dwelling (bedroom only; bedroom and living room; or bedroom, living room and kitchen) and the floor area of each room.

*More information on the space standard is available in Part 4 Section 43 of the Act:*

[www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2016/22/section/43](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2016/22/section/43)

### Enforcement Action

The Northern Ireland HMO Unit can take enforcement action on behalf of all local councils in the region, and has rights to enter HMOs to assess the condition of the property. Where a landlord fails to comply with the Houses in Multiple Occupation (NI) 2016 Act, the HMO Unit can vary the terms of the licence; issue fixed penalty notices<sup>5</sup>; prosecute; or revoke the licence.

Enforcement action depends on the circumstances of each individual HMO, but will be taken where the property is deemed unsafe for occupation and/or in cases where owners/managing agents are

<sup>5</sup> The maximum fixed penalty is £5,000; the maximum penalty on conviction is £20,000 plus £50 daily fine.

found to be operating a non-licensed HMO. Fixed penalty notices and/or legal action will normally only be applied for *occupied* dwellings, with the exception of Sections 78 and 79 (powers of entry).

#### *The Roma Community and HMO regulations*

It had been noted that, under the previous legislation, a privately rented house did not have to be registered as an HMO if it was occupied by two families or fewer. Housing Executive officers, who were still responsible for monitoring HMOs at the time when this scoping study was being drafted, noted that, in the case of large Roma families living in one house, there was a gap in the legislation. This remains the case under the updated legislation and – further – it has been argued that a substantial number of properties that were previously classified as HMOs now fall outside this classification, following the redefinition of HMOs under the 2016 Act. The new licensing arrangements are still in their infancy, and it will be some time before any impacts on the supply and/or standard of HMOs become clear.

## **5.5 Migrants and Housing Benefit**

As outlined in section 6.1, EEA nationals have the right to apply for social housing if they satisfy the “Habitual Residence” test. Similarly, irrespective of whether they rent from a social or private landlord, in order to qualify for Housing Benefit a tenant must show that he/she is “habitually resident” and has the right to reside in the Common Travel Area. To demonstrate that they are “habitually resident”, they must show that their intention when coming to live in the Common Travel area was to establish a permanent and settled residence (Law Centre, NI, 2016). This test is applied to everyone who comes to live and work in Northern Ireland for the first time or who is returning to Northern Ireland, following an absence abroad. The decision maker will have to take the following factors into account:

- Any preparations made in advance of moving to Northern Ireland.
- Any enquiries made about secure employment.
- If the applicant notified medical or school authorities (if they have children) of their intention to come to live in Northern Ireland.
- A certificate of occupation should be completed by a landlord or their agent as evidence of private rent and tenancy. (If this is not possible a tenant can show that a tenancy exists by providing other evidence, such as a tenancy agreement, rent book, deposit protection certificate and/or proof that payments have been made in respect of the tenancy).

The differing eligibility criteria for support with social housing and/or Housing Benefit are complicated, with some groups of migrants being totally ineligible.

## **Policy and Legal Context: Northern Ireland – Key Points**

The Outcomes Delivery Plan published by the Executive Office for 2018/19 is structured around a framework of 12 outcomes that aim to make the greatest possible difference to the lives and wellbeing of all members of Northern Ireland's population. On the basis that promoting tolerance and building resilience will help remove barriers to participation in society for people from a wide range of different backgrounds –including different racial groups – one of the key outcomes of the plan is that 'We are a shared, welcoming and confident society that respects diversity'.

Delivery of this draft Programme for Government (PfG) outcome is supported by the T:BUC strategy and the OFMDFM Racial Equality Strategy and associated Minority Ethnic Development Fund. The Racial Equality Strategy recognises that there may be a need to develop and implement specific programmes of work to address challenges facing particular groups such as the Roma.

The Housing Executive's Equality Scheme commits the organisation to the development and implementation of a Race Relations Policy, the aim of which is to ensure that all BME groups in Northern Ireland have access to housing services provided by the Housing Executive.

In Northern Ireland, the Housing Selection Scheme represents a single gateway into social housing, let on a permanent basis, whether owned or managed by the Housing Executive or any of the housing associations. In the case of persons from abroad, eligibility for housing or homeless assistance must be established. European Economic Area (EEA) Nationals have rights to enter and reside in the UK but, in order to be eligible for homeless assistance or an allocation of housing, they must have extended right to reside as a worker or self-employed person.

While Roma people living in Northern Ireland who are citizens of EEA countries may be eligible to apply for social housing, in practice the outcome of the application will depend on their ability to provide the necessary evidence and documentation to confirm their right of residency status.

Evidence suggests that, for cultural reasons and to minimise costs, Roma families tend to live in extended family groups in privately rented accommodation. The Houses in Multiple Occupation Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 came into effect from 1 April 2019, bringing updated regulations and a new licensing scheme, and transferring responsibility for HMOs from the Housing Executive to local councils. Irrespective of the number of occupants, whether or not dwellings are classified as HMOs will depend on the relationship between occupants.

Irrespective of whether they rent from a social or private landlord, tenants must be able to demonstrate that they are habitually resident in Northern Ireland in order to be able to apply for Housing Benefit.

## 6.0 Roma in Northern Ireland

### 6.1 Migrants in Northern Ireland

Between 2000 and 2014, an estimated 175,000 long-term international migrants came to Northern Ireland (Russell, 2016). Poland continues to be the most popular country of origin for international migrants coming to live in Northern Ireland. During 2014 and 2015 however, migration from Romania rose substantially. Analysis of medical card registrations showed a significant rise in the number of registrations by Romanian nationals in 2014 and the first half of 2015. Romania was the top country of origin for new medical card registrations in Belfast LGD, as well as being in the top three of several other districts. The increase in Romanian nationals coming to Northern Ireland is also confirmed by figures from the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) relating to National Insurance Number (NINO) applications. NINO applications from Romanians coming to Northern Ireland rose from 270 in 2012/13 to 2,420 in 2014/15. Between 2006 and 2014 an estimated 11,700 migrant households applied for social housing, of whom 2,000 were successful.

### 6.2 Number and location of Roma in Northern Ireland

Northern Ireland's framework for monitoring minority ethnic and migrant people was published by the Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) as part of its *Guidance for Monitoring Racial Equality* in July 2011. While the framework includes a distinct category for Irish Travellers, who by law are categorised as an ethnic group in their own right, it recommends that Roma are categorised under the 'other' ethnic group. Furthermore, many Roma avoid declaring their ethnicity for several reasons, including disadvantage, and instead use their nationality.

Precise figures for the number of Roma in Northern Ireland therefore do not exist; the 2011 Census did not contain a category for the Roma, who, in any case, often prefer to remain invisible to the authorities. It is also difficult to obtain accurate official statistics about the number of Roma in Northern Ireland due to a low uptake of health registration cards and the fact that they do not have (or seek) national insurance numbers, which require proof of identity (Johnston, 2010); research carried out by Tohani in Belfast found that the Roma did not have birth certificates or bank accounts.

However, over recent years several estimates have been made of the number of individuals and families from the Roma community living in Northern Ireland, and specifically in Belfast. According to the 'I am Roma Project-Belfast' (BHSCT/EC, 2012) the majority of Roma families had arrived in Belfast since 2007. At the time of publication, the report estimated that there were approximately 500 members of the Roma community living in Belfast, made up of 130-150 families. The majority of the Roma community in Belfast were Romanian and tended to reside in the Holylands and Lower Ormeau areas of South Belfast. However, it was noted that due to the mobility of the Roma community in Belfast, with frequent travel to and from Romania, the numbers of Roma migrants in the city are difficult to estimate.

Similarly, according to Brown et al (2013), in 2012 Northern Ireland's Roma population was estimated to be 500. This aligns with Wright's (2011) reference to mapping of the Roma community which was undertaken in 2010; the mapping exercise did not generate exact numbers, but estimated



that approximately 500 Roma were living in Northern Ireland, mainly in Belfast. The Roma Community Development Project (RCDP) mapped 149 Roma families with children aged up to 11 years in South Belfast in December 2013. These families had 274 children in total (ISSA, 2016).

Community development workers at the Romanian Roma Community Association for Northern Ireland (RRCANI) subsequently estimated that by September 2015 the Romanian Roma population was approximately 2,000 women, men and children, of whom around 1,500 were living in Belfast and 500 in other parts of Northern Ireland (Haydon, 2015). In addition, Haydon estimated (also in 2015) that approximately 500 Roma people of Hungarian and Slovak nationality were living mainly in Belfast. This compares with figures quoted by Russell (2016), who noted that it was believed around 1,000 members of the Roma community were living in Northern Ireland, mainly in South and East Belfast.

At around the same time, it was estimated (ISSA, 2016) that Roma people made up less than 0.2% of the population in Northern Ireland, with approximately 1,500 Romanian Roma and 500 Hungarian and Slovakian Roma living in Belfast, plus additional family groups in Craigavon and Ballymena. Many of the Belfast based Roma community were thought to come from the Arad and Bihor counties of Northwest Romania. A key informant who spoke to the Housing Executive as part of this scoping study stated that there is a well-established Romanian Roma community in Ballymena, as well as in South Belfast, with a Roma population of Hungarian, Slovakian and Czech origin in East Belfast and Roma communities in the Newtownhamilton and Keady area of South Armagh.

A document produced by the Northern Ireland Assembly containing statistics from NISRA noted that in 2016 around 1,000 members of the Roma community, mostly from Romania, were thought to be living in South Belfast (Russell, 2016:3). In her study of the Roma community in Belfast, Tohani (2017) found that they came from Bihor, a Romanian county on the Hungarian border. They tended to migrate in married couples, leaving children at home with grandparents. Children would then follow when their parents had acquired an income and obtained housing that could accommodate the family. Tohani discovered that friends and family from their village in Romania occupied much of the same area in Belfast. Evidence provided by the Housing Executive's Belfast HMO Unit in 2018<sup>6</sup> suggests that there are two separate groups of Roma citizens living in Belfast: those originally from Central Romania and another group from the Romanian border area living in South Belfast, and a more settled group living in East Belfast.

The estimates indicate that, with the enlargement of the EU between 2004 and 2007, growing numbers of Roma exercised their right to free movement and came to live in the UK, including Northern Ireland. Many settled in the Botanic/Lower Ormeau areas of South Belfast, with a small but growing number of Roma pupils attending schools in Northern Ireland, the majority (76%) in Belfast. In one small primary school in West Belfast, Roma pupils accounted for half of the total enrolment, or 70 out of 139 pupils (NISMP, 2015). As recently as 2016, the attendance of Roma children at primary school remained highly localised, with three or four schools accounting for the majority of pupils (Russell, 2016).

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<sup>6</sup> Local councils across Northern Ireland took over responsibility for houses in multiple occupation (HMOs) from the Housing Executive from 1 April 2019.

The Roma are generally employed in the informal sector, selling copies of The Big Issue, local newspapers or flowers, or working as car wash attendants in sites across Belfast. Embrace NI (2014) suggest that some Roma still return to their country of origin for seasonal work, so their numbers may vary during the year. The Romanian Roma community in Northern Ireland is socially conservative with a recognised patriarchal hierarchy. There are clearly defined gender roles, some of which are related to traditional Christian beliefs. A particular feature of the Romanian Roma community in Belfast is its strong affiliation to the Romanian Maranatha Pentecostal Church.

As part of the *Northern Ireland Proposals Document* for the 2021 Census (NISRA, 2019), NISRA has indicated plans to add a tick-box category for Roma to the Census question on ethnic group. While securing participation from the Roma community remains a further hurdle, the inclusion of a separate Roma category within the ethnic groups would be an important and welcome first step towards capturing baseline information on the characteristics and circumstances of the Roma community in Northern Ireland.

### **6.3 Housing and the Roma Community in Northern Ireland**

Wallace et al (2013) argue that, with the exception of Irish Travellers, little is known about ethnic minorities' outcomes in relation to health, education, housing and benefit receipt. They also noted that the high degree of residential segregation in many areas of Northern Ireland appears to have affected some migrants' housing choices.

The Equality Commission for Northern Ireland (ECNI) noted that members of the BME community, particularly migrant workers, are 'extremely vulnerable to exploitation and discrimination in housing and that tying accommodation to employment creates the conditions under which exploitation is possible' (ECNI, 2017:6). In 2011, Allamby et al (p.22) reported that, for migrant workers, 'work and accommodation are often linked where many cannot leave their job as this would render them homeless, creating a vicious cycle of working long hours and living in poor conditions'. Research about the relationship between poverty and ethnicity in Northern Ireland (Wallace et al, 2013) found that the majority of people from minority ethnic groups were housed in the private rented sector and reported 'overcrowding, unaffordable rents and poor management by landlords'. Some families were exploited by private landlords.

Roma families described how they were 'not always accepted as tenants and on many occasions landlords increased the rental rate on learning of their ethnicity' (Wallace et al, 2013:47). This reflects the experiences of Roma and Traveller communities in the Republic of Ireland, where 93% of respondents to a national needs assessment reported feeling discriminated against in accessing accommodation (Kennedy, Pavee Point Traveller & Roma Centre, 2018). In some cases respondents stated that landlords said they did not accept Roma tenants, but in other cases people would be told that the accommodation was already let. These findings tie in with Tohani's Belfast study, which indicated that renting privately resulted in substandard accommodation. Campbell and Frey (2010) noted that the rents charged in the Dungannon area to migrants exceeded the local housing allowance rate and a third of respondents said it was difficult to pay the rent. Incidences of larger households and overcrowding as a result of and response to these affordability problems were reported (STEP/Southern Health Board (date unknown); Campbell & Frey, 2010).

There is also evidence that the cost of renting a house privately has been challenging for Roma families. This has resulted in shared living arrangements and, according to Tohani (2017), it was not unusual to find three families living in a four bedroom house, as rent could only be afforded with the contributions of multiple individuals. Where more than one family share a house, each set of parents and their youngest children sleep in one room, with their other children sleeping together in another room (Haydon, 2015). The families share common access to a kitchen and a bathroom. Alternatively, a household may include a family plus members of their extended family; Matras (2015) notes that the extended Roma family consists of parents, their married sons and each son's nuclear family. Married daughters typically leave the household and move in with their husbands and in-laws, but unmarried siblings stay and form part of the extended household. Tohani (2017) found that the Roma in Belfast lived in extended family groups including relatives such as first and second cousins. In most households there were 3-4 nuclear families living within the household. There were also family members staying for a temporary period in order to earn money before returning to Romania. Overcrowding can lead to health and safety issues in the home (Wright, 2011).

The Housing Executive's Race Relations Policy identified the need to collect additional information on Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) and migrant worker communities in Northern Ireland. The first BME and Migrant Worker Mapping Report was completed in October 2006 and reports continue to be produced on an annual basis. The sixth annual survey (report published in March 2012) was the first to include questions specifically on the Roma community. From the questionnaire it was found that Roma families were living in four districts including Antrim, Armagh, Dungannon and South Belfast. Housing Executive staff indicated that the main reasons for members of the Roma community to visit district offices included "seeking accommodation" and "to find out about housing applications".

In 2015, respondents recorded that members of the Roma community were living in eight local office areas: Armagh, Coleraine, Dungannon, Newtownabbey, Newry, South and East Belfast, Waterloo Place (Derry/Londonderry) and Lurgan/Brownlow. Five local offices had been visited by the Roma community in the year to 31<sup>st</sup> July 2014: Armagh, Newry, South and East Belfast, Lurgan/Brownlow and Waterloo Place.

The latest BME and Migrant Worker Mapping Report, which was published in May 2017, reported that members of the Roma Community had visited Housing Executive offices in Downpatrick (South Down Area), Enniskillen (South West Area), Larne (East Area), Waterloo Place, Derry/Londonderry (West area) and South and East Belfast. The largest number of visits from the Roma population was in Waterloo Place (100). The main reasons for visits included applying for social housing, presenting as homeless and general advice on housing/homelessness.

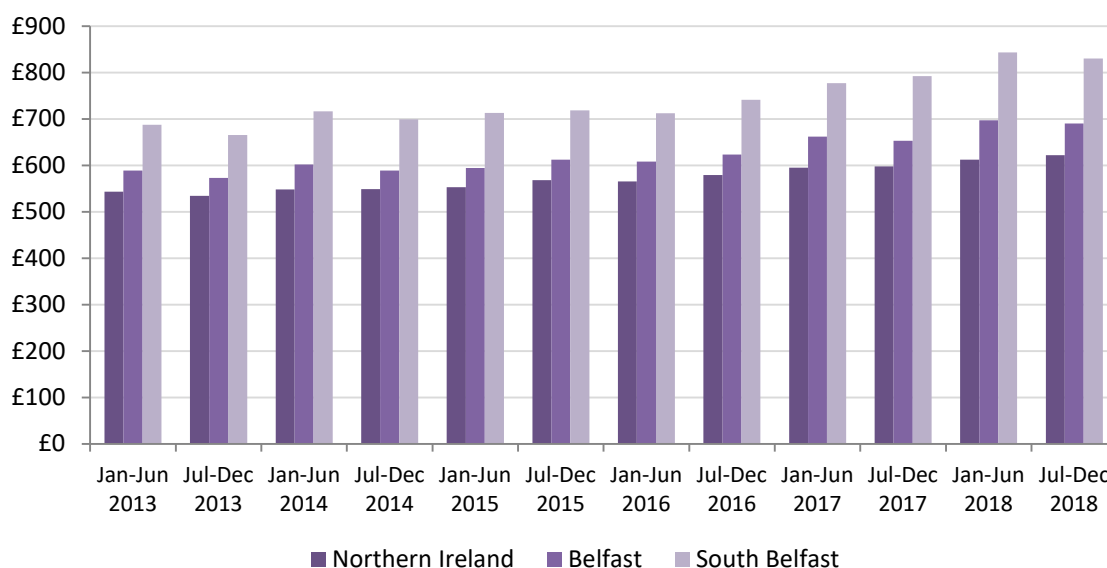
#### *Engaging and enabling: The Futures Project*

*By taking part in the Futures Project, a six-month programme for people aged 16-24 which is delivered by Belfast Met in partnership with the Housing Executive and start360 and supported by EU PEACE IV funding, a number of young Roma people from Co. Armagh who were not engaged in education or employment have been able to develop leadership and team work skills, improve their confidence and self-esteem, and become more involved in their local community. They have also improved their English language skills and will gain an OCN Level 2 award in Personal Success and Wellbeing.*

## 6.4 Housing issues in Belfast

O’Sullivan et al (2014) noted that access to the Private Rented Sector (PRS) is an important issue for migrant communities, especially those from Central and Eastern Europe. Data collated by Ulster University and PropertyNews.com for the Housing Executive indicates that South Belfast, where estimates suggest that there are concentrations of Roma families, is the most expensive district for rental accommodation in Northern Ireland (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Average monthly rent, Northern Ireland, Belfast and South Belfast, 2013-2018



Source: University of Ulster/PropertyNews.com/Housing Executive reports on Performance of the Private Rental Market in Northern Ireland

Bell et al’s (2004) study of migrant workers in Northern Ireland found that it was difficult to secure private rented accommodation because of the requirement for deposits and one month’s rent in advance. The majority of tenants in the ‘I am Roma’ survey reported that they paid rent directly to landlords, rather than to letting agencies, which leads to exploitation in many cases. Overcrowding is common and with this comes the associated health and safety issues. Officials from the Fire and Rescue Service, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and Belfast City Council try to ensure landlords meet the requirements under legislation for Houses in Multiple Occupation (HMOs).

A number of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) work with the Roma Community in Belfast (BHSCT/EC). They include:

- *South Belfast Round Table on Racism*, which was established in 2004 to reduce racism and promote diversity by bringing together a number of community, voluntary and statutory sector stakeholders with an interest in supporting the communities in South Belfast to promote diversity and eliminate racism;
- *Bryson Intercultural*, which provides support for newly arrived asylum seekers and independent advice on a range of topics including employment and housing, and also

advises clients facing problems such as racial harassment, domestic violence and destitution; and

- *The Lower Ormeau Residents Action Group (LORAG)*, which carries out work with Roma youth and is actively involved with the wider Roma community.

#### *Forced departure of Romanian Roma families from Belfast*

In the summer of 2009, a small community of Romanian Roma in South Belfast – some twenty to thirty extended families in total – were subjected to organised and sustained racist attacks (Clark & Rice, 2012). These acts of violence drove more than 100 members of Roma families from their homes to seek refuge in a local church and leisure centre and then, eventually, to seek a return to their country of origin (the Bihor region of North-West Romania), funded by the Northern Ireland Office. A small number chose to stay and not return to Romania. After a few months many decided to return to Belfast.

The intimidation of Roma did not cease after the attacks of 2009. Despite much work undertaken by organisations like the Round Table and Bryson Intercultural, supported by other public sector organisations, community and resident groups, incidents of violence against the Roma Community continued. Following the racist attacks of 2009, a Roma Task Force was established by the Office of the First and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) of Northern Ireland. The 'I am Roma' report (2012) contended that little work had been carried out at a governmental level to raise and promote awareness of Roma rights in Northern Ireland and this had led to a situation where the already vulnerable Roma population continued to have limited access to housing, education, employment and health services. However, a tension monitoring group (TMG) meets monthly to try and prevent and resolve some of the issues with the Roma and to co-ordinate responses. This is a multi-agency group facilitated by Belfast City Council which has police, city council, education, health, housing and community representation. More recently the TMG has focused on addressing internal tensions which are starting to emerge within the Roma community itself.

## Roma in Northern Ireland – Key Points

The combined impact of a general reluctance among the Roma Community to declare their ethnicity and the limitations of the monitoring framework means that it is currently difficult to make reliable estimates of Roma people and households in Northern Ireland on the basis of official statistics or administrative data. The proposal to add a tick-box category for Roma within the ethnic group question in the 2021 Census is an important first step towards providing baseline information for Northern Ireland.

Over the last decade or so, a number of attempts have been made to estimate the size of the Roma Community living in Northern Ireland. The estimates suggest that the number of Roma increased from around 500 in 2010 to at least 2,500 in 2016.

Evidence collected by researchers and support groups indicates that Roma living in Northern Ireland are mainly of Romanian, Hungarian, Slovakian and Czech origin. The greatest concentration are thought to be located in Belfast (particularly at locations in the South and East of the city including the Holylands, Lower Ormeau and Botanic), but there are also Roma communities in Ballymena, Craigavon, Newtownhamilton and Keady.

Members of the Roma community living in Northern Ireland generally work in the 'informal' sector, selling flowers, magazines and newspapers or working as car wash attendants. It is thought that some still return to their country of origin for seasonal work, so numbers in Northern Ireland may vary throughout the year.

Various research projects have indicated that relatively high proportions of migrant workers and people from ethnic minorities living in Northern Ireland tend to be housed in the private rented sector. These groups can experience overcrowding, unaffordable rents and poor management by landlords.

Research carried out in Belfast found the Roma lived in extended family groups, including relatives such as first and second cousins, with most households comprising three or four nuclear families.

In recent years, Housing Executive Managers have indicated that members of the Roma Community have visited Housing Executive offices at various locations throughout Northern Ireland. In 2017, the highest number of visits (100) was to the Waterloo Place office in Derry/Londonderry. The main reasons for visiting were: applying for social housing; presenting as homeless; and seeking general advice on housing/homelessness.

Access to the private rented sector is an important issue for migrant communities, particularly those from Central and Eastern Europe. South Belfast, where there are concentrations of Roma families, tends to be the most expensive district for rental accommodation in Northern Ireland.

In 2009 more than 100 members of Roma families were forced from their homes in Belfast after a sustained period of racist attacks and some left Northern Ireland permanently. The events prompted a multi-agency response from a number of stakeholders. A monitoring group continues to meet monthly to prevent and resolves issues with, and within, the Roma Community.

## 7.0 Conclusions

This scoping report provides an overview of the evidence available on the Roma community in Northern Ireland, with a particular focus on housing issues, in light of the wider research literature from across the UK and Ireland. The main findings can be summarised in light of the key aims of the report.



To set out the context on the Roma Community's housing eligibility, choice and opportunity in Northern Ireland

Depending on the circumstances of their residency in Northern Ireland, and their ability to provide the relevant documentation to prove it, members of the Roma community may be eligible for housing and/or homeless assistance and to access the welfare system. Similarly, again depending on circumstances, some Roma families may be classified under the relevant legislation as living in HMOs.

In practice, for a mixture of cultural and economic reasons (and as in other parts of the UK and Ireland) the Roma community in Northern Ireland generally tend to live in extended family groups in the private rented sector. In some cases, this has resulted in poor living conditions and exploitation of tenants who had few housing options and/or little awareness of their rights.

There is evidence of some engagement with the Housing Executive at local level on housing issues. Where possible, it will be important to continue to monitor the type and level of contact with members of the Roma community throughout Northern Ireland to gain a clearer picture of housing-related issues and challenges and ensure that, where relevant, both landlords and tenants are aware of their rights and responsibilities.

More broadly, ongoing local level engagement by statutory and voluntary organisations will be key in building relationships and trust in order to facilitate good relations and ensure that members of the Roma Community are able to avail of appropriate advice, assistance and services on a range of issues, including housing.



To collate any available information on the location and estimated numbers of Roma households living in Northern Ireland

As yet, there are no robust statistics on the number of Roma people living in Northern Ireland. This is partly a feature of the existing monitoring framework, which does not currently distinguish Roma as a separate group, and partly due to other factors such as individuals' reluctance to disclose their ethnicity for fear of discrimination and difficulties engaging with statutory organisations because of low levels of literacy and awareness.

However, various research studies and the experience of a range of voluntary and statutory organisations that engage with local communities indicate that the Roma community in Northern Ireland has increased in size from around 500 people to upwards of 2,500 over the last decade or

so. While securing engagement and participation may present difficulties, the proposal to add a tick-box category for Roma to the ethnic group question in the 2021 Census is a welcome first step towards providing official baseline information on the characteristics and circumstances of this community in Northern Ireland.

The available evidence suggests that settlement patterns for members of the Roma community in Northern Ireland have been similar to those in other parts of the UK, with concentrations of households from the same EU states (or regions within states) locating in areas where they are able to access private rented accommodation. While the largest concentration of Roma households is thought to be in Belfast, it is known that Roma families are also living in a number of other towns and localities across Northern Ireland, including Ballymena, Craigavon and parts of County Armagh.



### To examine any issues particular to Northern Ireland

This initial review of the evidence suggests that, relatively speaking, patterns of migration by members of the Roma community to Northern Ireland, and their living circumstances here, have been broadly similar to trends in other UK regions. The issues and challenges faced by Roma people have been recognised at EU level. Northern Ireland is not unique within the UK in not having a specific Roma integration strategy in place; only the Welsh Government has so far produced a framework for action in response to the EU requirement that all member states should develop strategies tailored to the needs of the Roma population in their country for the period to 2020.

It has been noted that Northern Ireland's legacy of residential segregation appears to have affected some migrants' housing choices. The *Outcomes Delivery Plan* published by the Executive Office for 2018/19 is structured around a framework of 12 outcomes that aim to make the greatest possible difference to the lives and wellbeing of **all** members of Northern Ireland's population. One of the key outcomes of the plan is that "*We are a shared, welcoming and confident society that respects diversity*". Delivery of this draft Programme for Government (PfG) outcome is supported by the T:BUC strategy and the OFMDFM Racial Equality Strategy and associated Minority Ethnic Development Fund. The Racial Equality Strategy recognises that there may be a need to develop and implement specific programmes of work to address challenges facing particular groups such as the Roma.



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