Welcome to our Annual Report for 2014-15. The last year has brought achievements and challenges for the Roma Support Group in the context of closure of many public services, the impact this continues to have on the voluntary sector, as well as welfare changes affecting all EU migrant workers in the UK.

Welfare changes, legal aid cuts and reduced independent advice and advocacy support, means that our frontline advocacy service had to cope with increasing demand, in some cases reaching our three-year targets in 12 months.

While continuing our frontline support, vital in reducing poverty, preventing homelessness and improving employability skills of individual Roma community members, we have also been creating the conditions for community empowerment. Roma refugees and migrants’ participation in our training and the Forum Theatre increased their understanding of their rights in employment, welfare and health services.

Last year, our Campaigning Project has empowered many Roma community members in London to participate in the decision making process and have a voice on matters that are important to them by using the platform of the Roma Refugee and Migrant Forum and local campaigns to co-shape local policies and services. Our experience and achievements in this area are now utilised in the Roma ‘Voice’ Project, the first national Roma advocacy programme, which we are currently delivering in partnership with the Black Health Agency in Manchester and the University of Salford.

Our Aspiration Project has continued to make a difference in the lives of Roma children enabling them to fulfil their potential and achieve in schools and after-school activities. Last year, our karate sessions and music classes were both successful in engaging Roma and non-Roma participants, thus promoting tolerance and building bridges. The Bridging Sounds Roma Youth Orchestra, which we launched last year in partnership with Newham Academy of Music popularises Roma music heritage in East London and looks into the future when Roma arts can be truly appreciated in every school curriculum.

We have also successfully continued to share our expertise and models of best practice with hundreds of professionals through our training sessions and expert advice interventions in many localities in Britain.

The following pages of this report will reveal more details about our work, which would not be possible without the support of our Funders and dedication of our Staff, Volunteers and Trustees, whose hard work and enthusiasm have enabled us to face the challenges and look forward to the opportunities ahead.

Raza Kotowicz
Chairperson

Our Mission
To improve the quality of life for Roma refugees and migrants by helping them to overcome prejudice, isolation and vulnerability.
To make the public aware of Roma culture, heritage and the current situation of Roma refugees & migrants in the UK

Our Vision
Roma communities are empowered through the realisation that their strength lies within every individual & his / her fulfilment as a member of society.
RSG is established at a meeting attended by over 80 Roma people at the Holy Cross Church in Kings Cross.

An advice service and social activities are launched at our first base at St Stephens Church in Royal Oak.

Advice services start at White City Community Centre and Proud Community Centre in Manor Park.

A grant from the Association of London Government enables us to develop our Advice & Advocacy Project.

We move to a new office in Canning Town and centralise our work in east London.

The production of our first publication - 'Colours of Hope: A Little Book by Roma Refugee Children for Everybody'.

A grant from the Association of London Government enables us to develop our Advice & Advocacy Project.

An exhibition, ‘From India to Islington: a 1,000 Year Roma Journey’, in partnership with Islington Museum.

Organising ‘The Big Issue for Roma: Exclusion or Engagement?’ conference Old Town Hall, Stratford

Organising the first national celebration of the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller History Month in London and Leeds.

The First London Roma Talent Show is organised. The grand finale takes place at Stratford Circus.


Elder Roma participate in the Holocaust Memorial Day Commemorative event as the representatives of all Roma and Sinti victims and survivors of the Holocaust and Nazi persecution during World War II.

We move to a new venue in Harold Road Centre in Upton Park is opened.

An expansion of our services and the establishment of an art and sport project takes place thanks to funding from the Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Fund.

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Co-organising an exhibition, From ‘Extra’ to ‘Ordinary’ in collaboration with the Romanian Cultural Centre

Launch of the DVD project ‘Be Roma or Die Tryin’

Participation in history project ‘Belonging: Voices of London’s Refugees’ at the Museum of London.

An exhibition, ‘From India to Islington: a 1,000 Year Roma Journey’, in partnership with Islington Museum.

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STAFF PROFILES

Advice & Advocacy Casework Supervisor (P/T)
Supervising and supporting Community Advice and Advocacy Workers with their casework, overseeing their training needs and ensuring that our advice service adheres to the Advice Quality Standard (AQS)

Art Development Co-ordinator (P/T)
Developing art programmes for Roma children and young people; coordinating Bridging Sounds Roma Youth Orchestra; organising and participating in cultural and art events

Aspiration Project Worker (P/T)
Providing educational advocacy and empowering young Roma to achieve and aspire through organising sport activities, mentoring, homework support and other after-school activities

Chief Executive (F/T)
Overall coordination/ management of the organisation and its activities; staff recruitment and supervision; policy planning and development; fundraising and financial management; publicity and promotion; office management

Community Advice & Advocacy Worker (P/T)
Addressing the needs of Roma service users and providing advice, information, advocacy and language support with particular emphasis on Roma families and vulnerable people

Deputy Co-ordinator (P/T)
Supporting overall co-ordination and management of the organisation and office management

Financial Officer (P/T)
Day-to-day accounts; preparing accounts for Audit, Management Accounts reports and budgets

Office Maintenance (P/T)
Keeping our working environment safe and clean; maintaining our office garden

Policy & Information Worker (P/T)
Influencing policies which affect Roma refugees and migrants, ensuring that Roma voice is effectively communicated to policy makers, the media and other key stakeholders

Roma Advocacy & Campaigning Project Worker (P/T)
Developing a Roma-led advocacy and campaign programme to enhance empowerment, civic participation and social inclusion of Roma refugees and migrants in London

Roma Community Advocacy Project Co-ordinator (F/T – job share)
Coordinating a programme of one-to-one and peer advocacy, including training sessions and Forum Theatre workshops

Roma Support & Engagement Programme Leaders (P/T)
Providing support to statutory and non-statutory organisations working with Roma communities across the UK through training and consultancy work
The Roma Support Group has been able to achieve much more than its resources would allow thanks to the hard work, enthusiasm and dedication of our Volunteers. Volunteers are involved in and help with all projects, e.g.: Advice & Advocacy, Arts (music, forum theatre and photography), Education Support, Aspiration, Policy & Campaigning Projects, as well as website, graphic design, interpreting and administration.

The Roma Support Group has also benefited from its partnership with the European Voluntary Service and Action Reconciliation Service for Peace, which enables us to host two Volunteers from an EU country on a full time basis for the duration of one year.

During the last year 33 Volunteers have contributed an average 156 hours per week!

Thank you

Michal Wilamowski, EVS/ARSP Volunteer

The last 12 months were an exciting opportunity to work with the Roma community on an everyday basis. I had a chance to meet people, hear their stories and learn to understand them. It’s extraordinary that I had to leave Poland and come to London to have a contact with the Polish Roma community as well as others... I also think that this community in Poland would benefit a lot by having an organisation such as the RSG, as their situation in Eastern Europe is still difficult.

I learnt a lot during last year, gained new experience and developed self-confidence. My voluntary service in the RSG has changed my expectations and plans for the future. It was a unique and rewarding experience that will stay with me forever. Thank you to the RSG, both staff and community members, for giving me the opportunity of being one of them.

Marta Babecka, EVS/ARSP Volunteer
Advice and Advocacy

Our Advice and Advocacy support enables Roma beneficiaries to overcome some of the problems, which they face every day, i.e.: poverty, housing, homelessness, health inequalities and employability issues. This support is delivered from our two centres in East and West London (Canning Town and White City) through appointments and drop-in system.

Among our beneficiaries are some of the most vulnerable and excluded members of the Roma community, including: older people, single parents, people with mental health issues and physical disabilities. They are mainly residents of London Boroughs of Newham, Hammersmith & Fulham, Redbridge, Ealing, Enfield and Waltham Forest. During the last year we have offered this support to 2,263 Roma refugees and migrants from Poland, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Lithuania, Romania and the Balkan region, achieving the outcomes featured above.

A wide range of welfare changes, which have directly affected EU migrant workers since 2014 had a profound impact on many Roma families, who were often caught in destitution and homelessness due to administrative delays, systematic errors and constantly changing rules over eligibility and conditionality of their access to welfare support. Coinciding with closure of many public sector services, legal aid cuts and diminishing independent advice and advocacy support offered by local voluntary organisations, these changes led to increasing demand and ever mounting pressure on this service.

“"We come here with all our problems, the whole lot of it, sometimes not even understanding where they start and finish - so complex is the world around us. And it's not only us Roma who use your service but all sorts of different people from Eastern Europe. There is simply nowhere else where we can go - your help is as much needed for us as bread and water.""

Roma beneficiary  
L. B Newham

“"It is all about trust. I understand that you cannot change the system or government policies but I know that you will do your best to help. You will never need to look for your service users, they will always find you"”

Roma beneficiary  
L. B Redbridge
ROMA COMMUNITY ADVOCACY PROJECT

The Roma Community Advocacy Project aims to reduce the social exclusion of Roma refugees and migrants in London by empowering them to bring about change in their communities through a two-way approach: i) One-to-one advocacy; ii) Peer advocacy, including community training sessions; consultations with service providers and decision makers; focus group meetings and Forum Theatre.

The Project’s rationale is underpinned by our understanding that the effects of multigenerational disadvantages, anti-Roma discrimination and social exclusion cannot be “fixed” with short-term solutions. While there is a need to continue our work with beneficiaries on a one-to-one basis, there is an equally strong need for their individual and collective learning about their rights stemming from their status as residents/citizens in Britain.

The Project has enabled Roma community members to participate in workshops, which explored access to employment and the welfare system; community learning leadership; mental health awareness and structure of health services in L. B. Newham.

Last year, the Project made progress in achieving the following outcomes:

- Increased confidence to manage their lives independently for 679 beneficiaries
- Improved employability skills and learning opportunities for 515 beneficiaries
- Improved health awareness, well-being and emotional resilience for 704 beneficiaries
- Increased levels of social interaction and reduced levels of isolation for 689 beneficiaries
Forum Theatre

One of the aspects of this Project, the Forum Theatre has engaged beneficiaries of one-to-one advocacy as “actors”, enabling their “problems” to become a constructive reference in the “actors” and audience’s effort to search for long-term solutions.

The Forum Theatre was delivered as a series of rehearsals, where participants constructed scenes, which portrayed their experiences and interacted with the audience, who intervened by shaping and altering the scenes, actions and outcomes. These shared insights acted as reference points for “actors” and the audience leading to positive changes in their lives, attitudes and environment.

The scenes performed during four public events addressed the following issues:

- Barriers to employment
- Anti-Roma prejudice and discrimination
- Access to health services – health inequalities and health exclusion
- Intergenerational conflict within Roma communities

The Forum Theatre was also a vehicle for learning for non-Roma professionals and decision makers, enabling them to understand Roma needs and aspirations and improving dialogue between the Roma migrant community and non-Roma in East London.

The Forum Theatre enabled Roma beneficiaries to address personal and social barriers as well as feel empowered to express their ideas. After public performances they stated that they felt listened to and valued, resulting in their increased confidence and self-esteem.

During the public performances, Roma beneficiaries were able to interact with the audience, which provided them with a powerful tool for exploring solutions to difficult problems that they face in everyday life.

“My question is ‘what’s next?’, ‘what can we do next if the presented solutions don’t seem to work?’ I think I would like to join the Forum Theatre to explore other alternatives. Keep me informed.”
(Roma member of the audience)

“I feel so much stronger after sharing my ideas and opinions in front of all those professionals”.
(Roma ‘actor’)

“Fantastic to see the way in which “the system takes over”. To some extent we know that it’s a huge problem but we don’t often see the crux of the problem when the powerless meets the powerful. I was able to observe the difficulties and frustration experienced by the participants in such a situation”.
(Member of the audience)

“Good insight into Roma experience – excellent, good-humoured, energetic, thought-provoking and moving.”
(Member of the audience)
ASPIRATION PROJECT

Roma Aspiration Project aims to increase life aspirations of Roma children and young people; enhance their confidence and increase their health awareness and well-being. Last year, 123 young beneficiaries were supported through one-to-one education advocacy; facilitating communication between families, schools and other professionals; and a programme of after-school activities including karate, dance and music classes, home tutorials and homework club.

The beneficiaries have also taken part in various seasonal activities (e.g. sport and music events), orienteering in Lee Valley Park and outings during which they had learnt new skills and had fun!

The differences made by the Project in the lives of beneficiaries last year are evidenced by an increase in the level of their satisfaction with educational attainment; enjoying their schools and increased self-confidence in their chosen areas of interest, such as: sport and arts. They have also made progress in their health awareness through their access to health services, participation in health related events and sporting activities.

Of the total number of young Roma supported through one-to-one education advocacy:

- 26% demonstrated reduced truancy and challenging behaviour
- 0% have been permanently excluded from school
- 100% successfully transitioned from primary to secondary school and remain in full time education (in contrast to the national dropout rate of 20% for Gypsy/Roma children)

“I believe that my education is important because without education you can’t do nothing in life, for example get a job. To be a bank manager, you need to be able to read and write in English.”

(Young Roma, 13 years old)
To harness young people’s enthusiasm in sport, the Aspiration Project organised a Sport’s Day, which gave them an opportunity to sample basketball, karate and team assault courses. The message of the event was “We are all winners!” and feedback from young people and their parents showed 100% satisfaction and enjoyment.

**Karate - Building Bridges and Breaking Barriers:**

Last year, we saw 30 young people taking part in karate sessions in East London, which focus on building self-confidence and strengthening mental and physical development of the participants. By engaging local Roma and non-Roma young people, karate also plays an important role in developing their social skills and community spirit.

Last year, our Roma Karate Club continued to impress the judges during three tournaments, coming home with 11 gold, 19 silver and 13 bronze medals in kata and kumite categories, including 3 gold medals won by two girls (9 and 11 years old).

“Karate training is all about developing self-discipline and respect for others. While making progress with these two qualities, young people can develop inner-strength, compete and achieve. Our club’s record is evidence of that”.

(Roma Karate Tutor)
I love playing guitar in the orchestra. I think that playing with other children is exciting. I hope that one day I can become famous and play in a really big orchestra.”
(Young Roma, 12 years old)

In 2014, we launched The Bridging Sounds Roma Youth Orchestra, a pioneering music initiative aiming to promote tolerance and combat anti-Roma prejudice by enhancing awareness of Roma music heritage in East London and beyond. The Project builds bridges between Roma and non-Roma young people, musicians and audiences and is delivered in partnership with Newham Academy of Music, Newham Music Hub and the Grand Union Youth Orchestra. The Project also focuses on training young Roma to develop their music skills, teamwork and confidence in an environment that is culturally diverse and celebratory of their rich musical tradition.

Last year, the Roma Bridging Sounds Orchestra engaged over 40 Roma and non-Roma young people from 8 to 25 years old of mixed instrumental abilities, who attended weekly rehearsals at the Newham Academy of Music (NAM), during which they benefited from group and individual tutorials with Roma and non-Roma Music Tutors. Young people, with no previous music skills, can now play basic chords; have improved their improvising skills and sight reading of music; and increased their confidence and self-esteem.

During the year, the Orchestra played to an audience of over 1,100 people, whose feedback has been encouraging and enthusiastic. Some of the quotes collected were:

“They sound really amazing. When have they started working together? It’s great, really inspiring.”

“The best orchestra this evening – I wanted to get up and dance!”

“Taking Roma music out of its community/family context and introduce it to other (non-Roma) musicians and students is an amazing professional challenge for me – I am learning something new all the time. I am proud to take part in this piece of work, which helps people to learn about and understand my culture better. It has most definitely inspired me to progress as a music teacher”.(Roma Music Tutor)

“This is a unique approach to ‘Roma arts’. It’s the first time something like this is happening. It helps to enhance public opinion about the Roma community and its culture and it promotes Roma music through intercultural collaboration. It’s a unique way for Roma children (and others) to gain new skills”.(Non-Roma Music Tutor)
The Roma Support & Engagement Programme is our response to an increasing need amongst service providers to ensure specialist interventions for Roma families in the UK. We have developed a range of chargeable services (e.g.: training, expert advice), which address Roma families’ needs while improving our financial sustainability and organisational capacity. Our training courses and expert advice services can be commissioned by agencies and organisations working with Roma refugees and migrants across the UK.

Training
Based on our consultation with the Roma community and our models of good practice, our training programme includes subjects, such as: Roma Culture Awareness; Working with Roma through Interpreters; Positive Interventions for Roma in Health and Education; Safeguarding in Roma Community.

Last year, we delivered
14 training sessions attended by 477 professionals. 93% of the participants stated that our training delivery either fully met or exceeded their expectations.

Expert Advice/Commissions
Last year we delivered 17 expert advice interventions including:

- 5 commissions from Social Services e.g. child protection cases
- 4 commissions supporting academic research
- Writing a Roma Guide for Community Care Inform (Adults Update)
- Delivering presentations at University of Salford, University of Manchester, Buckinghamshire New University, and University of Kent.

Through the expert advice and training courses we have indirectly supported over 1,500 Roma refugees and migrants across the UK.

Feedback from participants……..

“Excellent balance between child safeguarding and promoting rights of parents – a point missed in a lot of training.”

“I knew nothing of Roma culture - now I feel I have enough knowledge to help the community.”

“It’s given me a different perspective and made me challenge my assumptions.”

“Excellent training – I have learnt a lot. It was also good to hear directly from someone in the Roma community who was happy to be asked direct questions.”
Policy & Campaigning Project aims to improve the social inclusion of Roma refugees and migrants through their civic participation in decision making structures. The strength of this Project is in its community empowerment approach, as it gives Roma people a voice on matters that affect them on a local, national and European level.

The specific aims of the Project are:

✓ To enhance social inclusion of Roma refugees/ migrants by developing Roma-led campaigning work
✓ To increase Roma participation in the local decision making processes
✓ To encourage practice that is more responsive to the needs of Roma migrants
✓ To influence and co-shape local, national and European policies, which affect Roma refugees and migrants, ensuring that their perspective is effectively communicated to the UK Government.

Last year’s achievements include:

• Development of RSG policy positions on major issues facing Roma people (e.g.: poverty, health inequalities, employability, housing issues and homelessness; barriers to accessing public services)
• Launch of the quarterly Roma Refugee and Migrant Forum which engaged over 40 professionals and 11 Roma Advocates
• Launch of an influential e-newsletter disseminated to over 350 subscribers and posted on our website http://romasupportgroup.org.uk/?page_id=2773
• Launch of a public campaign (i.e. the Call for Evidence) about the impact on Roma communities of recent changes in eligibility for welfare benefits for EU migrants
• Representation of UK-based Roma refugees and migrants’ perspectives to the European Commission
• Relationships built with senior civil servants
• Successful parliamentary lobbying

Looking Ahead:

• Continuing to develop all our existing frontline projects
• Developing our local and national Policy, Information and Campaigning work in order to empower Roma communities and strengthen our effectiveness and capacity to influence policy and decision makers
• Further developing the Roma Support and Engagement Programme, which enables us to share our expertise and models of good practice with statutory and non-statutory agencies and develop our enterprising skills
• Promoting an understanding of Roma culture and history
• Implementing our fundraising strategy in order to ensure the continuity of frontline services in the areas of advice & advocacy, campaigning, education support, aspiration, as well as oral history and health-related projects.
Extracts from the Audited Financial Statements for the year ended 31 January 2015

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**FINANCIAL STATEMENT**

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The full audited financial statements were prepared in accordance with section 415A of the Companies Act 2006 relating to small companies and the Financial Reporting Standard for Smaller Entities (effective April 2008).

They were approved and authorised for issue by the Board of Trustees on 26 October 2015, and were signed on their behalf by Andrew Nash ACA (Treasurer).

A full set of audited financial statements is available on request from the charity’s registered office.

The accounts were audited by Vivek Kapoor, Senior Statutory Auditor, and on behalf of Ferguson Maidment & Co.
THANKS TO.....

We would like to take this opportunity to thank everybody who supported the work of the Roma Support Group during 2014 - 15 through grants and the donation of their valuable time.

Management Committee:
Prof. Thomas Acton OBE (Patron)
Ms Roza Kotowicz (Chair)
Mr Andrew Nash (Treasurer)
Rev. Rosemary Fairhurst (Secretary - resigned 17th November 2014)
Mr Daniel Brzezinski (resigned 2nd June 2015)
Mr Sylwester Herman (resigned 17th November 2014)
Ms Michaela Jarosinska
Ms Cecylia Kierpacz
Mr Peter Norton
Mr Cornel Rezmives
Mr Mircea Rostas
Mr Leon Wisniewski
Ms Anthea Wormington

Staff:
Ricardo Acuna, Dragica Felja, Edyta Gach-Karapetyan, Tania Gessi, Laura Greason, Sylvia Ingmire, Przemek Kierpacz, Ewelina Pawlowska, Simon Poffley, Ona Risoviene, Andy Shallice, Gabriela Smolinska-Poffley, Sasha Staskova

Sessional Staff:
Benjamin Czureja, Marek Czureja, Robert Dabrowski, John Das, Gejza Grundza, Miroslav Herak, Erene Kaptani, Stanislaw Kierpacz, Cezary Majewski, Ionel Mandache, Iveta Pohlodkova, Mihaela Rosca, Bobi Rostas

Volunteers:
Marta Babecka, Ruth Candlish, Artur Conka, Cristina Coptu, Julia El Mecky, Christian Fadoju, Viktoria Gorniak, Adrienne Green, Hanna Gynnerstedt, Andy Ingmire, Jessica von Kaenel, Marta Kowalewska, Zuzanna Krzemien, Jana Liebau, Richard Lipman, Maria Marais, Wesely Mears, Luminita Molic, Jeremy O’Callaghan, Amanda Petrovic, Roland Pohlodko, Cate Rickards, Pauline Rowe, Claude Savona, Jan Siwak, Georgeta Stanciu, Marysia Szapszowicz, Anita Wesolowska, Michał Wilamowski, Peter Williams, Krzysztof Wisniewski, Retts Wood, Sarah Zawacki

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CONTACT DETAILS

General Details:
www.romasupportgroup.org.uk
info@romasupportgroup.org.uk
T: 020 7511 0800 - Reception
(Line staffed on Mon, Tues & Thurs
from 10.15am - 1pm)
Mobile: 07949 089 778 (Mon-Wed)
F: 020 7511 0822

Projects:
Advice & Advocacy and Aspiration Projects
T: 020 7511 7343
info@romasupportgroup.org.uk

Roma Support & Engagement Programme
T: 020 7511 8245 / 020 7511 6508
rsep@romasupportgroup.org.uk

Office Address:
Alan Shelley House, 318 Barking Road
London E13 8HL
(Please do not send any correspondence to
this address)

Postal Address:
Roma Support Group, P.O. Box 23610
London E7 0XB

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