

A guide for

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# Roma parents on what to expect when working with social workers

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If Children's Services are involved with your family you may feel confused or scared. You may be worried about what the social worker might say or do. The most important things you need to do are understand the process, understand the changes you need to make, and do your best to work with the social worker. If there are problems on the way, you can read this guide for help on how to deal with common problems you might face.

Children's Services is the name given to the department in each local council that is responsible for the safety, health and well-being of all children. Children's Services employ social workers.

## Who this guide is for

This guide is for you if:

- you are a parent, and,
- you live in England, and,
- Children's Services are involved with your family.

If you are a parent and Children's Services are involved with your family you may well feel scared and anxious - wondering why they are getting involved. You may be worried about what will happen to your children and how you will be treated.

It's important you stay calm, and get support from a community organisation that can help you. You will find a list of community organisations who work with Roma in England at the end of this guide.

## How to use this guide

This guide needs to be read alongside [A guide to child protection for Roma parents](#) which explains the processes and procedures you need to understand if Children's Services get involved with your family.

## What this guide does

This guide explains:

- who Children's Services are, and what they do,
- what standard of work you can expect from the social worker,
- common problems you might face and what you can do,
- what to do if you are not able to sort out problems with the social worker, and,
- when and how to get legal advice from a solicitor.

This is just one of our resources to help you.

- We have a [film made with Roma in Romanes about the child protection process](#).
- This guide works alongside our [guide for Roma parents on the child protection process](#) in England.
- We have a [film made with Roma in Romanes about a parent's view on their experiences of the child protection process](#).

## Why we have written this guide

In 2018, we created [A guide to child protection for Roma parents](#). Since then, we have worked with Roma organisations who support Roma families through the child protection process. We have written this guide in response to feedback from them. We want to help Roma parents have a better understanding of what to expect from a social worker involved with their family, what their rights are and how to deal with common problems they face in the child protection process.

We have created this guide for Roma families. However, we know that some Roma might find the guide too detailed to use without help, for example from community support or advice workers. So, although the guide addresses Roma families directly, we expect community support and advice workers to be the main users of the guide.

Depending on where you (or the family you support) are in the process, you can choose to read the guide from the start or choose a section that is most relevant to you.

## Legal language

We try to explain any legal language as we go along, but there is also a [What does it mean?](#) section at the end to help you.

## What countries does this guide cover?

The information in this guide applies to England only.

Each country has its own laws. If you have come to live in England from another country, some of the English laws may be different from what you are used to. While you and your family live in England, these are the laws that apply to you.



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# Who social workers are and what they do

## Children's Services

Children's Services is the name given to the department in each local council that is responsible for the safety, health and well-being of all children. Children's Services employ social workers. Their job is to support children and their families to keep children safe. They have a legal duty to put the well-being of children first. Sometimes their view on what is best for a child may not be the same as yours.

It is important to understand that social workers get involved with many families across England but few cases end up with a child being removed from their parents. The law says that Children's Services need to support families to bring up their own children unless it is necessary for their safety to live somewhere else. This is because generally, it is much better for children to stay with their parents or wider family, with support, if needed, than be moved away.

What the social worker should try and do is to work with you and support you to make changes so that your child is safe and well looked after. We have made a film in Romanes about keeping Roma children safe to help you, with examples of things a social worker might be worried about.

When Children's Services get involved with your children, you will have to meet new people from Children's Services

who will ask questions about your family life and use words you perhaps haven't heard before. It is important to understand what they mean. We explain some key words next.

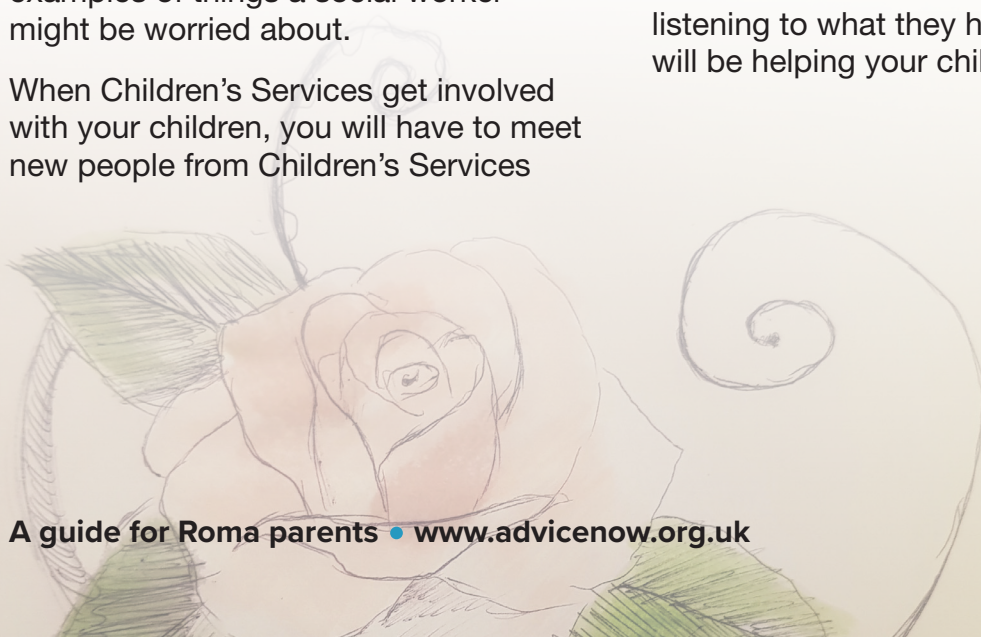
## What is 'child protection'?

Child protection is the name given to the system and processes for protecting children who are suffering, or might be at risk of suffering 'significant' harm, because of abuse or neglect.

Harm is what happens when someone treats a child badly or damages their physical or mental health or development. To work out if the harm is 'significant', the social worker has to compare the health and development of your child with that of a similar child.

There are different types of harm. We explain more about them in [A guide to child protection for Roma parents](#). You might also like to watch our short film on this issue aimed at Roma parents in England, [Keeping our children safe](#).

It can be hard to understand what a social worker is saying or doing when everything is new and you are worried about your children and what is going to happen. But it is really important to try and work with the social worker. By listening to what they have to say, you will be helping your children.



# Top tips for working with social workers

Top tips  
for working  
with social  
workers

In this section we explain how to work well with the social worker.

It is really important that you do your best to work with the social worker and cooperate as much as you can, as this is the best way to help your family stay together.

**1. Listen** to what the social worker is saying - don't ignore the problem - it will just get bigger if you ignore it!

**2. Keep in regular contact with the social worker** - find a good way to contact the social worker and keep in touch. The best way might be by phone or voice recordings. If the social worker asks you to tell them about certain things like any health problems or accidents be sure to do so as soon as possible. Don't leave it and hope the problem will go away. If they don't answer straight away remember that they have lots of families to keep in touch with. Be sure to keep calling if you can or ask your advocate to help, if you have one.

**3. Try to be open and honest** with the social worker - this will mean they worry less and you can make some progress together. For example, if you don't understand what is expected of you tell the social worker so they can explain things better. If you need an interpreter to understand things properly, make sure the social worker knows this.

**4. Try to stay calm and polite**, even when you are feeling scared or frustrated. Getting angry or defensive will make the social worker worry more.

**5. Try and find someone to support you**, from a Roma community organisation, or a solicitor or both.

**6. Be open about being Roma.** If you feel able to, try and explain your point of view and experiences. You are the expert on your life! This may help the social worker understand your culture and any difficulties you may have in working with them. If you have a support worker you could ask for help with how to do this.

**7. Make sure you don't ignore any paperwork** that you are given or get sent. You need to read it or get someone else to help you read it. Then you need to reply to the social worker and keep the paperwork safe - as a record. If you can, keep a copy of anything you send to the social worker.

**8. Try to speak to family members** who might be able to help support you with your children or look after them if you and the social worker agree this is best, or if the court decides you are not able to look after them yourself. The sooner you can do this the better.

**9. Try to be open about any learning difficulties or disabilities** you know or think your child has - you can ask for your child to be assessed by a children's doctor if you are worried about their health or development.

**10. Don't sign anything you don't understand** - if you are asked to sign a document it means it is about something important. If you sign it the social worker will expect you to do the things it says in the document. If you don't understand what it says you won't be able to do what the social worker has asked you to do. This is likely to cause problems with the social worker. It is likely they will think you have understood but chosen not to do the important things they have asked.

For more help, be sure to look at the section called 'How to best help your child and your family' in [A guide to child protection for Roma parents](#). It is really important that you work with the social worker and cooperate as much as you can. A big part of this is finding the

courage to be honest when you don't understand rather than making the social worker think you do understand. You can read about a Roma family's experience of this in Rudolf and Martina's story.

Top tips  
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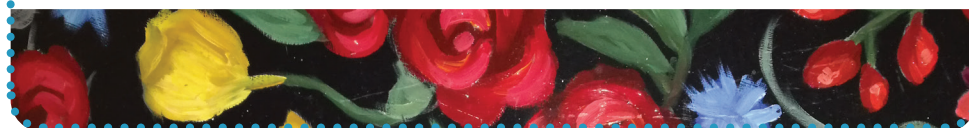
### Rudolf and Martina's story

Rudolf and Martina were told by a specialist doctor and a social worker that one of their children was autistic. They didn't really understand what this meant. They thought because a doctor had worked out the problem it was an illness like other childhood illnesses. They thought that the doctor would give their child medication and the child would get better. They were not able to read about autism as they found it hard to read in their second language of Slovak and impossible to read in English. They were worried about asking more about autism because they didn't want the social worker to think badly of them for not understanding in the first place.

At a meeting a month or so after the doctor had told them about their child's condition the social worker was critical of the parents for not knowing more about the disability or doing more to help their child themselves.

Fortunately Rudolf and Martina had a Roma advocate with them at the meeting who was able to explain that the parents understood very little about autism. The advocate could explain that the parents were worried about telling the social worker they didn't understand the problem and couldn't read about it.

After this help from the advocate the parents had the courage to be more open about what they did and didn't understand. They got more information and help from the doctors and social worker about autism. Once they understood more they were able to follow the advice given to help their child.



The social worker also needs to gain your trust to work well with you. Next we talk about how the social worker should work with you.



# The standard of work you can expect from the social worker

This section talks more about what good quality social work looks like and what you as parents can expect.

## Social work standards

Social workers are professionals. This means that they have trained to become a social worker and have got qualifications and practical experience so they can work with children and their families. It also means that there are rules about what they must and must not do in their role as social workers.

Social workers must work to certain standards. When we talk about 'professional standards' we mean the skills, knowledge and behaviour that are needed for a person to do good job at work.

[Social Work England](#) sets the professional standards for all social workers who work in England. By following these standards, social workers should do high quality work - this is known as 'best practice'. To meet the standards set by Social Work England, all social workers need to do the things listed next.

- Respect your human rights (we talk more about these in a bit), views, wishes and feelings and those of your community.
- Be respectful and treat you with dignity.
- Use evidence to reach decisions, not just come to decisions based on their own opinions.
- Keep their training and learning up-to-date so that their skills and knowledge are always improving. As part of this, they need to listen to feedback from you and other families.
- Respect your children, your family and your culture and behave in an honest way when working with you.
- Stand up to any behaviour they see that is abusive or discriminatory.
- Tell you about your right to complain and explain how to do it. If you do complain, they must not treat you any differently.

The standard of work you can expect from the social worker



## A view from Bella - a social worker working with children and families

There are demands on our team because we are short-staffed and there have been lots of cuts to the money that Children's Services get from the government. The Covid pandemic has had a big impact on everyone. The cost of living crisis is affecting everyone too but those who were already having a hard time are struggling the most.

All this means that social workers must work even harder to meet our professional standards to support families.

For me this means juggling lots of different needs and pressures. There is less money to help families early on when they are finding things difficult which means we often only get to work with families when they are nearing or in a crisis situation. We have a lot of cases to manage. Many social work departments have to use temporary staff who take time to settle in and then often leave so we are short staffed all the time. I have to focus on keeping children in my area safe but also be respectful of the parents and their background and culture.

I try hard to keep my word - for example if I say I will call a parent to talk at a certain time I make sure I do. Sometimes due to the pressures of the job this isn't possible though - then I explain why carefully. I try really hard to keep to all the dates we have agreed but if I am running late for a meeting or I am late to report on a family member I make sure everyone is told in advance and they know the reason why.

Sometimes I have to work with an interpreter to make sure the family and I understand each other properly. Communication is key. Without it, it is really hard for me and the families involved to make any progress. I need to know what the parents think and how much they understand so that things improve for their children. The parents need to feel heard so that they know their views are valued.

I make sure I am open and straightforward with the parents I need to work with. I listen to them to learn more about their background and culture. I try to be supportive so that families feel less threatened. I make sure I ask what support they need from social services such as furniture for a new baby or financial support for taking part in meetings or assessments.

The standard of work you can expect from the social worker

For more detailed information on the standards of work social workers must meet you can go to [Social Work England professional standards](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/672222/Social_Work_England_professional_standards.pdf).

# Your rights when a social worker gets involved with your family

The law says that social workers must put the wellbeing of children first. It also says that children should be raised within their family, usually by their parents, unless the court says this is not in the best interests of the children. This means that the social worker must respect your family and help you keep your children safe at home, if they possibly can.

Social workers need to listen to your views and make decisions with you where possible. This means that they should involve you in decisions unless they decide that it is not safe to do so. If that happens they will ask the court to make a decision. You can read more about the court process in A guide to child protection for Roma parents.

If your children need to leave your care for a short time or for longer, under a court order, the social worker must do the things listed next.

- ✓ Make sure you have safe contact with your children, as long as there is no court order saying you can't see them. How often and where contact will take place will depend on your situation and what the court says. If you are not happy with what the social worker or judge decides you need to get help from your solicitor.
- ✓ Make efforts to see if there are family members or friends who can care for your children, instead of them staying with foster carers.

- ✓ Work to promote your child's culture and heritage wherever and whoever they live with.

There are lots of laws and rules about this. Family Rights Group has a lot of reliable information on care proceedings and a free, confidential and independent advice line to help parents and other family members.

You have other rights, known in law as 'human rights'. We talk about these rights next.

Your rights when a social worker gets involved with your family



## Social work and your human rights

The law in England protects everyone's human rights.

Your right to a private family life is protected. This means that generally Children's Services should not intervene in your private and family life, unless they have evidence that makes them worried about your child's safety.

If you have to go to court about the care of your children, you have the right to a fair hearing.

For more advice and guidance on your human rights under the law go to the [Equality and Human Rights Commission](https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/) website.

## What best practice looks like for Roma families

### The social worker should

- ✓ listen to you
- ✓ make it clear to you what they are asking you to change
- ✓ work in partnership with you
- ✓ respect your culture
- ✓ work to support your children staying in your care as long as it is safe for them.

We talk about these and other things the social worker should do in more detail next.

The standards set by Social Work England mean that you can expect the social worker for your children to do the things listed next.

- ✓ The social worker should **listen to your views** and concerns. They should understand that you are likely to be worried about them getting involved in your life. They should ask you what help you think you need for your children to stay in your care.
- ✓ You can expect the social worker to **be clear about what their concerns are** about your children and what change they want to see. This includes explaining how they will be involved and making sure you understand what is happening. For example this could include helping you understand reports or having letters translated into a language you can read.
- ✓ They must **work in partnership with you** to gain your trust - this includes making sure you can communicate well with them. This could mean finding the right interpreter, or different ways of keeping in touch if you do not read or write well - such as voice messages to record important information.
- ✓ Social workers need to **respect your family and culture** and treat you with dignity - they should not make assumptions about your life or background. Instead, they should ask questions to understand your culture and learn about your wider community.

Your rights when a social worker gets involved with your family



Your rights when a social worker gets involved with your family

- ✓ The social worker needs to **maintain your privacy** - by looking after private information you give them, as long as the law doesn't require them to share that information, for example if it is necessary to keep a child safe. Social workers must explain why they need private information, how they will store any sensitive details, and how will this information be used. This means that they need to keep information about your family private, for example from your neighbours.
- ✓ They should **help you find information on your rights** about the child protection process and where to get support from. For example, a social worker should help you find support locally with parenting skills in a way that you can access. If you can't read they should explain to you face to face where to get help rather than giving you paperwork.
- ✓ From the start, the social worker must tell you that you have a **right to complain**, and how to complain. They should not treat you differently if you complain about them.

# Common problems you might face and what you can do

Roma parents can experience various problems when social workers get involved with their family. Next we talk about some of the most common problems faced by Roma parents.

## Problems with communication and interpreters

If English is not your first language then it is really important to have an interpreter to help you. Social workers may find an interpreter who speaks the official language of the country you lived in before you came to England. But, if that language is not your first language that may not be very helpful to you.

If the interpreter is not actually helping you understand what is happening it is really important to say so. Otherwise, the social worker will expect you to understand everything properly, when in fact you might only understand a bit or not at all. They may then make assumptions about you and how you interact with them. They may think you are choosing not to do things on purpose, when in fact you just don't know what is expected of you.

The social worker may also have important documents translated into the official language of the country you lived in before the UK. They will do this to try and help you. But, you may not be able to read this language or you may only be able to read every-day words in this language, not the language used in more formal situations that the social worker might use.

- **What you can do** - If the only language you speak confidently is Romanes, it is important to tell the social worker this as soon as possible. There is a shortage of interpreters who speak Romanes and so the social worker will need time to make arrangements. If you have an interpreter that you understand most of the time but you don't understand some words, make sure you say so and ask for the words you don't know to be explained to you more clearly.

It is really important to say if you don't understand what is happening or being said. Make sure you don't agree to things that you don't understand. It is much better to say you don't understand upfront than agree to things you don't really understand. This is because later the social worker will expect you to do something based on what you agreed but you won't be able to if you aren't sure what you are being asked to do. The social worker is likely to think you deliberately decided not to do what was asked of you. This will not help the situation. If you don't understand letters or reports the social worker gives you, tell them as soon as possible so you can get help.

When it comes to important documents that the social worker may have translated for you, it is very important to explain if you cannot read that language. If there is no language that you can understand when it is written down you must tell the social worker so they can carefully explain what the important documents say, with an interpreter if you need one.

Common problems you might face and what you can do



## Martina and Erik's experience with interpreters

Roma Parents Martina and Erik originally from Slovakia, came to the UK 4 years ago. Children's Services became involved when their third child Marcin was born. The parents went to a child protection conference about all their children - Iveta, Robert and Marcin. A Slovakian interpreter was there throughout and made sure everything was communicated to the family in Slovakian. Later, when their Roma support worker asked how it went, they were not able to explain what had happened at the meeting or what needed to happen next. They said that they didn't want to look silly or seem like they didn't understand or weren't willing to do what the social worker wanted so they just said 'yes' to everything. They explained that they found it very hard to understand formal words about something so important and stressful in their second language.

Their support worker helped them by speaking to the social worker but by the time she was able to do this the parents had already missed another important meeting with the social worker at their home. The social worker had thought they knew about this meeting and was worried that they had chosen not to be there. Later when the support worker explained the situation she was able to re-arrange the visit.



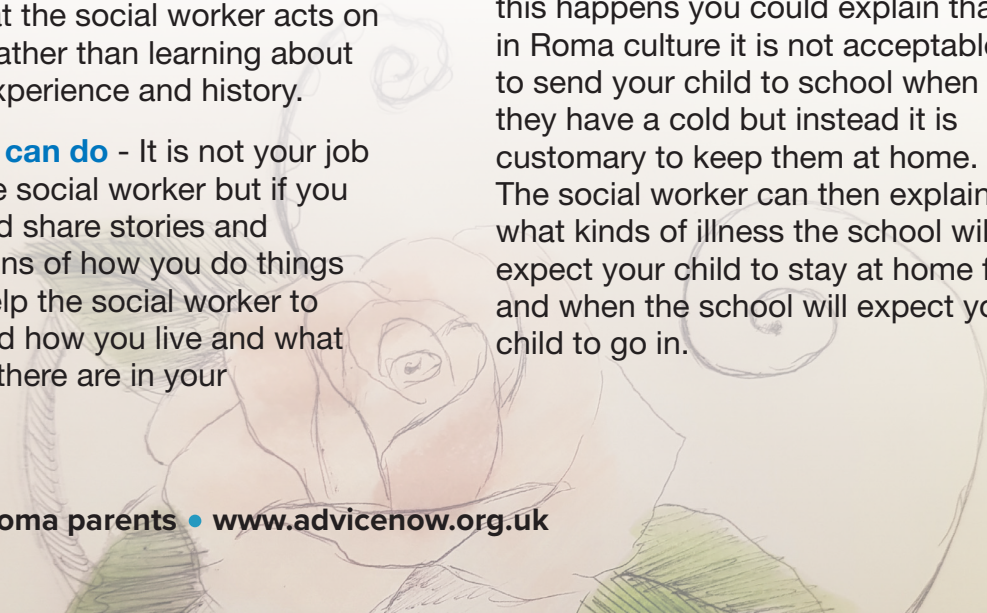
Common problems you might face and what you can do

## Lack of understanding of Roma culture

Roma community members have told us that misunderstandings between social workers and Roma families have caused problems. Sometimes, Roma parents find that the social worker does not understand their Roma culture and heritage. A lack of cultural awareness can mean that the social worker acts on stereotypes rather than learning about your family experience and history.

- **What you can do** - It is not your job to train the social worker but if you can try and share stories and explanations of how you do things this will help the social worker to understand how you live and what strengths there are in your

community. For example, when it comes to pregnancy, you could explain that Roma women do not see having a baby as a medical problem and this is why some Roma parents don't think to go to the doctor or the midwife when they are pregnant unless there is a clear problem. The social worker might say your child's attendance at school is not good. If this happens you could explain that in Roma culture it is not acceptable to send your child to school when they have a cold but instead it is customary to keep them at home. The social worker can then explain what kinds of illness the school will expect your child to stay at home for and when the school will expect your child to go in.





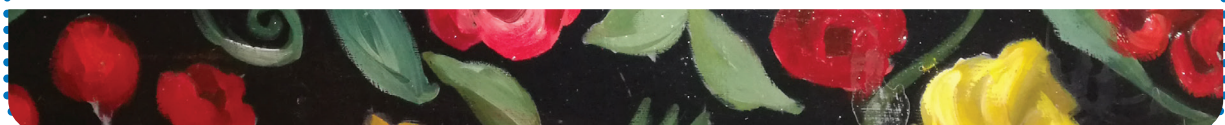
## Maria and Mihai's first experience of a social worker in their home and how it could have gone better

Roma parents Maria and Mihai offered the social worker food and drinks when she first visited but the social worker didn't want any. They were a little offended. They offered again on another visit and she didn't want any that time either.

Maria and Mihai found the social worker unfriendly - she did not chat or smile much and she seemed distant and serious to them. She was not positive or lively. They found this strange and unwelcoming. Instead of looking at them when she spoke they found that she was busy looking at her paperwork and making notes. She brought up difficult topics that they could not talk about in front of each other or older relatives who were also there. She seemed annoyed. They felt embarrassed. They felt she did not like them or their home.

### How it might have gone better

- The meeting could have gone better if the social worker had understood how important hospitality is in Roma culture - that it is considered rude and unwelcoming not to offer food. She could have helped the situation by warmly thanking the parents for the offer of food and drink but explaining that she is not able to accept meals from families when she is working.
- If the social worker had understood that the parents would have liked more eye contact with her this would have helped. But also she could have explained that she has to record what is said at the time of the meeting so that the notes are accurate - not just based on what she might remember later on.
- It would have helped if the social worker had understood that in Roma culture it is taboo to talk about certain issues in front of members of the opposite sex or from different generations. For example, a Roma mother would not feel able to discuss her health problems in front of her husband or her mother in law.
- The parents could have explained that in their culture it is rude not to offer food to a visitor.
- If the parents had understood that the social worker is under a lot of pressure and has lots of families to see, they might have understood her behaviour more. She unfortunately has serious things to talk about and this is why she did not come across as lively or happy.
- If the parents had explained that in their culture they do not speak about certain topics in front of members of the opposite sex or different generations this would have helped the social worker. For example, a Roma mother would not feel able to talk to a male social worker about her health problems or with a female social worker in front of a male family member.



Common  
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Common problems you might face and what you can do

## Digital exclusion

You might find that since the pandemic, the social worker and other professionals expect to use digital ways of working, such as video calls and emails. If you don't have things like a computer, a laptop, a tablet or a smart phone and Wi-Fi, then this way of working is impossible for you. You may not know how to use the various digital platforms (like Zoom or Teams) that social workers use.

- **What you can do** - you need to explain that you don't have a smart phone, Wi-Fi or enough data on your phone or even access to electricity and that together you will need to work out different ways of keeping in touch and exchanging information.

You can ask to attend meetings at the social worker's office, where you can get support to join digital meetings. If you are asked to join a hearing that is not in a court building but by video call instead you will need equipment like a smart phone or computer, good Wi-Fi and a private space. If you don't have these things it is very important that you tell your social worker and solicitor so they can help you. If you do use a digital platform but it is not the one the social worker uses you could ask if they could use the one you are comfortable with, such as WhatsApp.

## Our top tips

- **Try to stay calm**- even when you don't feel it at all. If you get angry the social worker will worry you get angry easily at home. Also, being angry will mean you are less able to take in and understand important information about your children.
- **Keep the social worker up to date** - for example with your new contact details or if you can't make an appointment. Be sure to tell them of any important incidents - such as an accident or new problem with the children. If you are not sure what would be an important thing to tell the social worker, ask them.
- **Ask for help from a Roma advocate**- see our list at the end of this guide for more help on this. This will help you feel calmer and better supported.
- **Ask questions** - make sure you understand everything. If you don't understand something, ask the social worker to explain. Ask again and again until you are clear what is expected of you.
- **Keep records** - make notes if you can or ask your advocate to do this and keep all letters, reports and any other documents that social workers give you somewhere safe. This will help you keep track of what is going on. If you can, get a diary to record appointments and important things to do. Or keep voice notes and reminders in your phone, if you have one.
- **Treat social workers with respect**- even if inside you feel angry or scared.
- **Try to be patient** - Children's Services are very stretched and the process can be slow. But, this does not mean you should be left not knowing what is happening. Politely ask for updates if you don't get them regularly and explain politely that you feel things are going too slowly.
- **Be honest** - it is better to be honest with the social worker about your situation than try and guess what you think the social worker wants to hear. It is likely the social worker will find out you have not told the truth and this will be worse in the long run. Look at Paulina's story for a reminder of why it is so important to be honest from the start.



## Paulina's story

Roma mother, Paulina, came from Poland with her six children to be nearer to her own mother in the UK. A social worker became involved with Paulina and her children as she struggled to manage all six children when her mother was ill. Sadly, there was then an accidental fire in Paulina's home. Paulina was forced to move into her mum's small flat with all the children. She was worried about what the social worker would say and do about them all living in the small flat. She decided to lie and tell the social worker she was moving to stay with another family member, whose home was bigger, as this, in her view, would be better for the children.

The social worker needed to visit the family in their new accommodation. She went to see Paulina and the children at the new address Paulina had given her. No one there could help or explain where Paulina was. The social worker was worried. And she had quickly found out that Paulina had lied to her. This made her even more worried. Eventually she found Paulina at her mum's home. Paulina was anxious that the social worker had found out about the lie. Only with the help of a Roma advocate could Paulina explain why she had lied. The social worker accepted the explanation but said that she would need to do more regular checks at the home to be sure they were all there and safe.



Common problems you might face and what you can do

# What to do if you are not able to sort out problems with the social worker

It is always best to try and work with the social worker who is involved with your family as this will help your children.

You may feel upset, angry or scared about what is happening and feel it is the social worker's fault. It is best not to take out these feelings on the social worker as they are usually just trying to do their job in often very demanding situations.

Social workers often have to work with many more families than they used to. They have to help people in very difficult circumstances and can feel stressed or overwhelmed themselves. Many services that they used to work with, like children's centres, or services such as the Traveller education teams, have closed down in the last ten years so there is even more pressure on them.

Due to all these pressures, sometimes they won't do their job as well as you would expect. On very rare occasions a social worker will do something that Social Work England would need to [investigate](#).

More common problems come from significant everyday pressures on social workers. Examples might be where the social worker doesn't reply to you as quickly as you would expect, is late for appointments or late to get paperwork to you. They may also be rushed because they are short staffed and may not take enough time to explain things to you in a way that you can understand.

This is often called 'poor practice'. It happens when a social worker doesn't give a good standard of care or support or doesn't respect the rights of the people they are working with.

Serious problems you might face could be to do with the social worker:

- not respecting your culture or heritage or
- making decisions on information you think is incorrect or incomplete, or,
- not knowing the law.

You might want to complain about these problems. We talk more about this next.

## If you think you have experienced poor practice

Before you make any decisions about making a complaint it is important to understand that if the family court has been asked to make a decision about your child, complaining will not get that court order changed.

If you decide to complain, it is important to think carefully about **when** in the process to complain.

You have the right to complain and doing so should not count against you but it can be hard to work with the social worker after you have complained. There is **no** guarantee that your child will get a new social worker just because a complaint has been made.

If you have a solicitor ask them for their advice. If not, you can get free, confidential and independent advice from [Family Rights Group](#) on this. They are a charity who advise families on their rights and options when social workers or the court make decisions about their children's welfare.

What to do if you are not able to sort out problems with the social worker

When deciding when to complain it is important to know that Children's Services usually only have to deal with complaints about things that have happened **in the last 12 months**.

## Who to complain to and how to complain

### Remember!

If you do decide to complain it is really important to:

- ✓ try to stay calm
- ✓ be polite but firm
- ✓ don't shout or swear
- ✓ ask an advocate or other member of your community to support you. We talk about these and other things the social worker should do in more detail next.

If you decide to complain these are the steps you need to go through.

### Step 1

First, try and sort things out with the social worker if you feel you can. If this doesn't work ask to speak to their manager.

They should help you and the social worker come to a better understanding and sort out the problem. It is best to try and resolve the problem at this stage if you can as this is likely to cause the least damage to the relationship you have with the social worker which will help your child.

If you are not happy with how the social worker and their manager deal with the problem then you need to complain to:

- the Children's Services Complaints Officer, or
- the Complaints team at the council where the social worker is employed.

Every council must have a complaints officer or complaints team.

Don't be put off if you are worried about writing things down. You can ask an advocate to help you write a complaint. Or you can just tell Children's Services you want to make a formal complaint, or you can record a voice message or video if you have a phone that lets you do this. Be sure to go to [Family Rights Group - how can a complaint be made](#) for more help if you decide to complain.

There are three parts or stages to the complaints process.

**Stage 1** - this is when the social worker, their manager and the complaints officer respond to your complaint to try and solve the problem informally. If you are not happy with their suggestions you can go to the next stage.

**Stage 2** - this stage is longer and more formal with a proper investigation. There must be a report that sets out what was investigated and what should happen next. You must get a copy of this report. Someone called an 'adjudicating officer' makes a final decision about the complaint based on the report. You must get a copy of this decision.

**Stage 3** - If you are not happy with the decision made by the adjudicating officer you can ask a panel of three people who have no involvement in the case or the complaint to review the decision. This is called a 'panel review'. They look at what happened at Stage 2 to decide if the complaint was properly investigated. They need to suggest a solution to the problem and see what can be done to put right any injustice faced by the person complaining.

**What to do if you are not able to sort out problems with the social worker**

For more details on how each stage works, look at [Family Rights Group - how complaints are dealt with](#).

If you are still unhappy after going through the Children's Services complaint process you can go on to step 2.

## Step 2

If you are not happy with how the council where your social worker works has dealt with your complaint you can complain to the Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman. This is an independent organisation that has the job of investigating complaints about local government bodies - this includes the council that employs your child's social worker.

It is important to understand that the [Local Government and Social Care Ombudsman](#) cannot investigate a complaint if:

- You simply don't like the decision made by the social worker
- The complaint is about a court case about your children - whether it is happening now or has ended.

For more help and information on taking this step, look at Family Rights Group's section called [complaining to the Local Government Ombudsman](#).



## If you think you have suffered discrimination

### What is discrimination?

Discrimination is where you're treated worse than other people because of who you are.

Race discrimination happens when you are treated worse than someone else because of your race. 'Race' includes your nationality, and ethnic or national origins. Race discrimination is unlawful. So, the law says that a social worker cannot treat you less well than another parent just because you are a Roma parent. If they do, then that treatment would be 'race discrimination'

You can also be discriminated against if the social worker or their employer have rules or ways of doing things that put you as a Roma parent, and people like you, at a disadvantage. An example of this might be when the social work team do not provide a Romanes interpreter for a parent that only speaks Romanes.

You can read more about the ways people are protected from being discriminated against on the [Equality and Human Rights Commission's website](#).

If you think you may have suffered race discrimination because of the way the social worker has treated you or because the way they work has put you, as a Roma parent, at a disadvantage it is important to get some legal advice. Go on to the next section for more help on this.

What to do if you are not able to sort out problems with the social worker

# Getting legal advice

It is really important to get legal advice about where you stand in relation to your care of your children and what Children's Services are doing. Look at [A guide to child protection for Roma parents](#) for help on when and how to find a solicitor who specialises in children law. If you can find a solicitor who has represented other Roma in the past this is likely to help.

Having read the information above about discrimination, you may think you have been discriminated against. You will need expert legal advice to work out if you might have a case. If you want to look into this option you need to do it quickly as the law says you only have 6 months, from the date when you say the discrimination happened, to apply to court for a judge to make a decision. You will need a different lawyer who specialises in discrimination law to help with a possible discrimination case. For suggestions on where to go to find one, go to the section called [More help and advice](#).

## Dos and don'ts of getting legal advice

### Do:

- Tell the whole truth - it is very important for the person giving you the advice to have all the information they need - this is the only way they can advise you on the best way forward.
- Make sure you mention things that have happened, even if they are embarrassing, intimate, or painful. It's very hard to tell someone you've never met before and don't know whether you trust about private problems. If you are female and would prefer to speak to a woman, or male and would prefer to speak to a man, explain this to your solicitor.

- Challenge mistakes - it is important to do this as soon as you notice them as it might be harder to do this later as information gets repeated and used by different people working with your children or working on the case about your children.

### Don't:

- Don't miss anything out on purpose even if you feel embarrassed or nervous - if you're found out later it is likely to damage your case.
- Don't miss something out because you think it isn't relevant. Every detail, however small or unimportant it seems to you, may count. It's better that your solicitor decides what is or isn't relevant. If you leave something out it may make it harder for your solicitor to help you. But equally don't feel any pressure to make things up - if you can't remember something, for example a name, date, or place.
- Don't just say what you think the solicitor wants to hear. If you try guessing what the social worker, solicitor or judge want hear rather than telling the truth you will create serious problems for yourself. For example, if the solicitor or social worker explains something to you about what will happen next or what you should do next, you may feel that it would look bad if you say that you don't understand or don't know how to do the thing they are asking. You may be tempted to pretend you do understand. But if you don't understand you may not do something very important that the social worker or judge expects you to do. This will create more problems. The social worker or judge may think you are not being honest.

**What to do if you are not able to sort out problems with the social worker**

## Top Tips

### 1. Helping the process to go well

- Give your solicitor the complete story - give them as much detail as possible about what has been happening from your point of view.
- Keep in touch with your solicitor – this way you should avoid things going wrong with your case, for example, missing deadlines or important meetings or hearings.
- Let your solicitor know if you need to change the address where your post goes or your telephone number or email address (make sure you tell the social worker too!).
- Keep all documents you get from your solicitor somewhere safe (and any that you get from the social worker).
- Make sure you go to meetings and hearings, and arrive there on time, or better still, get there early.
- Ask your solicitor what to call the judge and where to sit and how to behave in court.

### 2. How to tell if your solicitor is doing a good job for you

- Did they take detailed instructions from you? (Instructions are what you say about what has been happening and what you think should happen next).
- Did they advise you on your chances of success?
- Did they clearly explain the process and what they were going to do next?

- Did they give you copies of important documents about your case?
- Did they use an interpreter and arrange for important documents to be translated if you needed that?
- Did they clearly explain to you what you can expect from them, and what they expect from you?
- Did they give you information about how to complain about their services, with the help of an interpreter and translated documents if you needed that?

If the answer to all these questions is 'yes' you can be reasonably confident that your solicitor is doing a good job for you.

### 3. Interpreters

- Interpreters should not give you legal advice – this is against the law.
- If the interpreter that has been provided to help you, speaks a language that isn't actually your preferred language you need to explain this and say which language you need them to speak to enable you to properly understand what is happening.
- If you suspect an interpreter is explaining what you say wrongly you should let the solicitor know straightaway – even if this means stopping a meeting or hearing. Even if you can't speak to the solicitor in their language try and make it clear that you are not happy with what the interpreter is saying.



## Changing your solicitor if you are not happy

You have a right to good advice and a right to complain if you are not happy with the job your solicitor is doing for you. However, do remember that just because a solicitor doesn't tell you what you want to hear, that doesn't necessarily mean they are bad at their job.

Changing your solicitor is not something you should do lightly but if you are very unhappy with your solicitor you may have to. If you do not think you are getting good service or advice, the first thing you should do is tell your solicitor you are unhappy and why, to see if they can put things right.

If you are getting legal aid, you will only be able to change your solicitor if there is a good reason to do so. For example, if your solicitor is not telling you what is happening, or giving you documents and keeping you up to date, or if they do not make sure you understand the legal process and tell you what is likely to happen.

If you want to change, then the earlier in your case you change the better. You can't have two solicitors at once. Make sure a new solicitor will take your case on before you leave your old one.

It can be very difficult to find a new solicitor to take on a case so it is important that you find a good one at the very beginning. The longer you leave it the harder it is to get a new solicitor.

If you can't find a solicitor near you, you may have to travel. A solicitor a long way from your home will need to be sure that there is no local solicitor who can help you before they can take on your case under legal aid. You should write down what you have done to try to find a solicitor closer to your home. If you are eligible for legal aid, you may be able to get help with transport costs. Discuss this with your new solicitor before you go to see them.

## How to complain about a solicitor

### Who you can complain about

If you think your solicitor has treated you badly or given you bad advice you can complain using their complaints process.

### What you can complain about

You can complain about any problem you have had with the advice given by your solicitor, including:

- bad advice
- poor service, for example, not explaining what they're doing
- bad or very slow communication with you
- losing documents
- not finding out about your past experiences in full
- making false claims of success
- missing deadlines
- failing to appear in court

If you complain to your solicitor's firm and you are not happy with how they reply you can complain to the Solicitors Regulation Authority or the Legal Services Ombudsman. These organisations deal with different problems. To help you decide who you need to complain to, look at the Law Society's [Complain about a solicitor](#) page.

Getting  
legal advice

# More help and advice

## How to find good advice

Getting good legal advice about Children's Services' involvement with your children

<b>Costs and legal aid</b>	<p>There is no need to worry about how you will pay your solicitor if Children's Services organise a 'pre-proceedings meeting' or go to court. This is because if you are the child's parent you will automatically get free legal aid (help from the government to pay for legal advice) whatever your financial situation. If you have a court order that says the child who the social worker is involved with must live with you, you will also get legal aid.</p> <p>If you want legal advice at an earlier stage, perhaps when Children's Services first contact you then legal aid may be available depending on your financial circumstances. You can <a href="#">check if you are eligible at</a> <a href="#">Check if you can get legal aid</a>.</p>
<b>How to find a solicitor</b>	<p>You need to get legal advice from a solicitor who specialises in <b>children law</b> as soon as you can after Children's Services get involved with your family. It is good to get early advice and guidance on what to do, even if the social worker isn't saying they are going to court straight away.</p> <p>You need to get legal advice immediately in the following situations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● The social worker gives you a letter called a 'pre-proceedings' letter.</li><li>● The social worker asks you to agree to your child living somewhere else for a while - get advice before you sign anything!</li><li>● You get a letter saying the social worker and their solicitors at the council are applying to the court for an order about your child. This is called 'care proceedings'.</li></ul> <p>Some councils give parents a list of local solicitors who can help them. If you are given one of these lists it is a good idea to call the solicitors on the list to see if they can help you, or ask anyone supporting you to do it for you.</p>



More help and advice

## How to find a solicitor

Don't worry if you aren't given a list - there are other places where you can find a solicitor.

You can find a specialist solicitor by searching at [Find a solicitor in England and Wales](#). Choose 'Family public law – legal aid' in the drop-down menu offered under the heading 'Area of practice' and 'Children' in the drop down-menu offered under the heading 'Second area of practice'.

If you find it difficult to use the internet, ask a community organisation to help you by doing this search for you or call the Law Society on **020 7320 5650** (line open Monday to Friday from 09:00 to 17:00) and ask for help to find a solicitor specialising in child protection.

Many solicitors who specialise in children law have an out of hours emergency number you can call if, for example, social workers contact you in the evening or at the weekend or you suddenly find out you have to go to court the next day. They will usually provide a limited amount of free advice before you can get legal aid. Check the solicitor's website for details of the firm's emergency number.

[Family Rights Group](#) can give you information on how to find and work with a solicitor. They are an organisation that supports parents when social workers make decisions about their children. They run a free advice line on 0808 801 0366 which is open Monday to Friday 9.30am-3.00pm (excluding bank holidays).

## Costs and legal aid

You can get legal aid for legal advice on whether you have been discriminated against. You need to show your financial documents to a solicitor who does this kind of legal work. They will look at your financial situation and tell you if you are entitled to legal aid. If you are, you will not have to pay for their advice, or you might be asked to pay a bit of money towards it. This is called a 'contribution'.

More help  
and advice

## Getting good legal advice about a possible discrimination claim

<b>Costs and legal aid</b>	<p>Many solicitors who specialise in children law have an out of hours emergency number you can call if, for example, social workers contact you in the evening or at the weekend or you suddenly find out you have to go to court the next day. They will usually provide a limited amount of free advice before you can get legal aid. Check the solicitor's website for details of the firm's emergency number.</p> <p>Family Rights Group can give you information on how to find and work with a solicitor. They are an organisation that supports parents when social workers make decisions about their children. They run a free advice line on 0808 801 0366 which is open Monday to Friday 9.30am-3.00pm (excluding bank holidays).</p>
<b>How to find a solicitor or adviser</b>	<p>The first thing to do is to go to '<a href="#">check if I can get legal aid</a>'. Then click on the option called 'Discrimination'. Then choose 'Race' and then choose 'When someone was carrying out a public function'.</p> <p>This takes you to a page with a list of the documents you will need to show the solicitor or adviser so they can work out if you are entitled to legal aid. There is also a link on the page to click on 'Find a legal adviser'.</p> <p>You then need to search for solicitors or advisers near you, using a postcode. Be aware that there are not many firms of solicitors or advice centres that cover this area of law and so depending on where you live you may have to be prepared to travel to get advice or have advice over the phone.</p> <p>You can also contact the <a href="#">Equality Advisory Support Service</a>.</p> <p>They have a free helpline offering personalised advice on discrimination issues throughout the UK.</p> <p>The Equality, Advisory and Support Service (EASS) can help people who are not entitled to legal aid to find an accessible legal service or to prepare and lodge a claim themselves.</p> <p><b>Helpline:</b></p> <p>0808 800 0082, 0808 800 0084 (Textphone)</p> <p><b>Opening hours:</b></p> <p>Monday to Friday 9am - 7pm, Saturday 10am to 2pm.</p>

More help  
and advice

# Community organisations that can help

Organisation	Description	Region/ Address	Contact details Website
<b>Roma Support Group</b>	Roma Support Group (RSG) is a Roma-led charity working with East European Roma refugees and migrants. Since 1998, RSG has worked with thousands of Roma families, offering them a variety of services, engaging the Roma community in all aspects of running and managing the organisation and promoting an understanding of Roma culture in the UK.	<b>National</b>	<p><b>Email:</b> info@romasupportgroup.org.uk</p> <p><b>Website:</b> <a href="http://www.romasupportgroup.org.uk">www.romasupportgroup.org.uk</a></p> <p><b>Appointment line</b> Polish language line - 07903883748 (Tuesdays only 10.00 – 11.00)</p> <p>Romanian language line - 07366 502575 (Wednesdays only 12.00 - 13.00)</p> <p><b>General enquiries</b> 07949 089778</p>
<b>Friends Families and Travellers</b>	Friends, Families and Travellers is a leading national charity that works to end racism and discrimination against Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people and to protect the right to pursue a nomadic way of life.	<b>National</b>	<p><b>Website:</b> <a href="http://www.gypsy-traveller.org">www.gypsy-traveller.org</a></p> <p><b>Helpline:</b> 01273 234 777</p> <p>Monday-Friday, 10:00am-4:30pm, excluding Bank Holidays.</p> <p>If you work for a voluntary sector organisation supporting Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. You can get advice too via a new portal.</p> <p>If you would like access to the portal, please message <a href="mailto:fft@gypsy-traveller.org">fft@gypsy-traveller.org</a>.</p>

Community organisations that can help

Organisation	Description	Region/ Address	Contact details Website
<b>Traveller Movement</b>	National organisation that advocates for and works with Gypsy, Roma and Traveller people to tackle discrimination and promote equality. They also have a new website called Safe Space for Women with information on working with social services, discrimination and domestic abuse. They also have a free helpline.	<b>National</b>	<a href="http://www.travellermovement.org.uk/">www.travellermovement.org.uk/</a>  A Safe Space for Women <a href="https://women.travellermovement.org.uk/">https://women.travellermovement.org.uk/</a>
<b>Luton Roma Trust</b>	Luton Roma Trust works in partnership with other agencies in Luton helping Roma families to integrate in a holistic way into the UK.	<b>Luton</b>	<b>Email:</b> office@lutonromatrust.org.uk  <b>Website:</b> <a href="http://www.lutonromatrust.org.uk">www.lutonromatrust.org.uk</a>
<b>Clifton Learning Partnership</b>	Clifton Learning Partnership works with Roma, providing drop in sessions, job club, ESOL and other activities.  It aims to improve the educational outcomes for children, tackle issues of deprivation, diversity and poverty, and increase participation in learning by the whole community.	<b>Rotherham</b>  Eastwood Village Community Centre, Erskine Rd, Eastwood Village, Rotherham, S65 1RF	<b>Tel:</b> 01709 728069  <b>Email:</b> enquiries@clifton-partnership.org.uk  <b>Website:</b> <a href="http://www.clifton-partnership.org.uk">www.clifton-partnership.org.uk</a>
<b>Gypsy, Roma, Traveller Team</b>  <b>Bristol City Council</b>	Drop-in for Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people.  Resources for professionals	<b>Bristol</b>	<b>Tel:</b> 07469 413134  <b>Email:</b> ian.bowen@bristol.gov.uk  <b>Website:</b> <a href="http://www.bristol.gov.uk/grt-bristol">www.bristol.gov.uk/grt-bristol</a>

Community organisations that can help

Organisation	Description	Region/ Address	Contact details Website
<b>Youth Association Wakefield</b>	<p>The Youth Association has been working with young people from across Yorkshire since 1904.</p> <p>They work with Roma Czech/Slovak and Latvian young people on the streets of Hexthorpe in Doncaster, Great Horton in Bradford and Central Barnsley. Youth workers support them to better integrate with the local community and achieve their aspirations in the UK.</p> <p>They provide intensive support by offering workshops, accredited training and informal activities at street-level to help young people fulfil their aspirations, develop their skills and move towards positive destinations in their lives.</p>	<b>Wakefield</b>  The Youth Association 12 South Parade Wakefield West Yorkshire WF1 1LR	<p><b>Tel:</b> 01924 333 400</p> <p><b>Email:</b> <a href="mailto:info@youth-association.org">info@youth-association.org</a></p> <p><b>Website:</b> <a href="http://www.youth-association.org">www.youth-association.org</a></p>
<b>Granby &amp; Toxteth Development Trust</b>	<p>The trust works with Roma families, mostly from Romania, to find information about public services in the UK, including accessing employment and support with job search. It also supports Roma families to settle in the city and access local schools in order to facilitate engagement with Roma parents, organises an after-school programme and activities in the schools to celebrate Roma culture and history.</p>	<b>Liverpool</b>  129d Lodge Lane, Liverpool L8 0QF	<p><b>Website:</b> <a href="http://www.gtdt.co.uk/">http://www.gtdt.co.uk/</a></p>

**Community organisations that can help**



Organisation	Description	Region/ Address	Contact details Website
<b>Connecting Roma C.I.C.</b>	Connecting Roma offers a range of services, spanning Bradford and South Yorkshire. This includes assistance with finances, residency and housing, as well as employment and education, culture and integration, and information on legal rights and responsibilities. Connecting Roma also runs a Covid-19 helpline and offers support with EU Settlement Scheme applications.	<b>Bradford</b>	<b>Tel:</b> 01274 495970 <b>Email:</b> connectingroma@gmail.com
<b>COMPASS</b>	Offers advice and advocacy, sport activities, dance classes, youth club	<b>Peterborough</b>	<b>Tel:</b> 01733685100 / 07518945849 <b>Email:</b> contact@compas.org.uk <b>Website:</b> <a href="https://compas.org.uk/compas">https://compas.org.uk/compas</a>
<b>Romani Slovak Czech Community CIC</b>	Assist people in Gravesham and Kent. They also offer virtual assistance, nationally. They have a variety of projects including: advice and advocacy project, English language support project, youth projects, and cultural activities	<b>Northfleet, Kent</b>	<b>Tel:</b> 07865 080 161 <b>Email:</b> slovak.czech.community@gmail.com <b>Website:</b> <a href="http://www.romani.top/">http://www.romani.top/</a>
<b>Europaia</b>	Europaia provides practical community projects, events, training sessions, advice clinics and legal support to give European citizens the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to integrate into their local communities. They also run a project for Roma Women to give them space to relax and gain new skills through regular face-to-face meetings.	<b>Manchester</b>	<b>Tel:</b> 0333 305 8570 <b>Email:</b> support@europaia.org.uk <b>Website:</b> <a href="https://europaia.org.uk/">https://europaia.org.uk/</a>

Community organisations that can help



Organisation	Description	Region/ Address	Contact details Website
<b>Idea Rom Association</b> <b>(Roma Support Nottingham)</b>	Idea Rom is a charity supporting Roma living in Nottingham. They offer everyday support to the Roma community there - school, work, health - and help Roma families access the help they deserve.	<b>Bradford</b>  Lancaster House 10 Sherwood Rise Nottingham NG7 6JE	<b>Tel:</b> 07710466588  <b>Email:</b> birou.romanesc@gmail.com  <b>Website:</b> <a href="https://romasupportnottingham.co.uk/">https://romasupportnottingham.co.uk/</a>



Community organisations that can help

# What does it mean?

**Best practice** - this is another way of saying 'good quality work' where the social worker puts the needs of the child or person they are working with at the centre of what they do.

**Discrimination** - Discrimination is where you're treated worse than other people because of who you are. The law says that a social worker cannot treat you less well than another parent just because you are a Roma parent. If they do, then that treatment could be 'race discrimination' - where you are treated worse than someone else because of your race. 'Race' includes your nationality, and ethnic or national origins.

**Law Society** - the Law Society represents solicitors in England and Wales and sets standards to make sure they deliver a good and ethical service.

**Legal aid** - this is money from public funds used to pay for legal advice and representation for those with little savings and on a low income. The Legal Aid Agency pays solicitors who they have approved to provide legal aid.

**Poor practice** - this happens when a social worker doesn't give a good standard of care or support or even ignores to the rights of the people they are working with.

**Social Work England** - this is a public body, separate from the government, which regulates social workers and sets standards for best practice that social workers need to follow.



What does  
it mean?



## Disclaimer

The information in this guide applies to the law in England only.

The law is complicated. We have simplified things in this guide. Please don't rely on this guide as a complete statement of the law. We recommend you try and get advice from the sources we have suggested. The cases we refer to are not always real but show a typical situation. We have included them to help you think about how to deal with your own situation.

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Making sense of the law and your rights

If you would like this guide in another format  
please email [guides@lawforlife.org.uk](mailto:guides@lawforlife.org.uk)

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**the  
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**Law for Life - July 2023**

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