**A Living Tradition CIC**

**Citizens Advice Gateshead and the local Roma Community**

A Living Tradition CIC began funding the Roma Kavarna drop-in for local Roma people in January 2018 at Cumbric on Coatsworth Road in Bensham.   As the drop-in was being established, so A Living Tradition began to have conversations with Citizens Advice Gateshead.  This dialogue led to a partnership between A Living Tradition and Citizens Advice Gateshead and this report outlines the problems we encountered and how we solved them in order to help what is a very marginalised community

The Roma Community in Gateshead

The eastern European Roma community in Gateshead is about 600 strong and is mostly based around a number of streets in Bensham and Teams.   The community has developed partly due to people moving over here from Newcastle and partly from people coming directly from the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania.

Eastern European Roma began to arrive in the UK as asylum seekers in the 1990’s after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the Communist regimes in eastern Europe.   Many Roma in eastern Europe were finding that they were actually worse off under the new democratically elected regimes, than they had been under communism as discrimination and prejudice, which had been kept under a firm lid under communism, were able to flourish again.  The numbers who came in the 1990’s were added to by those who came after 2004 when the European Union was extended.

The problems the community face

The eastern European community in Gateshead face numerous deep-seated problems.

First and perhaps foremost, like most immigrant communities, they face a language barrier.   Over time this can be expected to reduce as a problem as older members of the community learn more English and younger members go through school.  However, the barrier is still a real problem and can be expected to continue being so for some time.

There are also numerous cultural problems

Firstly, there is a lack of trust.  This has come about for a number of reasons.  First and foremost, there are the life experiences of members of the eastern European Roma community, who suffered terrible discrimination during their time in countries such as the Czech Republic, Slovakia and Romania.   This has included discrimination against Roma in the areas of health, education, housing and jobs. Understandably, this has led to a suspicion and distrust of service providers and this conditioning effect has followed the Roma community from eastern Europe to this country.  Consequently, many Roma people in Gateshead find it difficult to engage with service providers.  They might not expect to receive any help, or even worse, they might expect their situation to be made worse.

Another reason for a lack of trust in service providers by this community could also be because they are from eastern Europe.  It has been noted in relation to Covid-19 conspiracies in eastern Europe that, “the region is awash in it, a legacy of the breakdown of public trust in governmental institutions after communism. Feverish conspiracy theories have gripped these countries like the coronavirus’s shadow.” (1)   It is further argued that this problem is not confined to Covid-19, as it has been said that, “the low level of public trust that distinguishes Eastern Europe is a legacy of the collapse of communism, the deep transitional recessions in many countries, and the failure of post-communist governments to mitigate the effects. While a much-shared Reuters article reports the opinion of unnamed “experts” who blame “decades of Communist rule that eroded public trust in state institutions,” public trust was actually much higher under communism.” (2)   So, the Roma in Gateshead arguably suffer from a double whammy when it comes to trusting public services; there are the effects of being Roma and the effects of being from eastern Europe.

Lack of education

Another major area where the Roma have a problem which erodes their ability to engage with service providers is a lack of education.  This can lead to a lack of confidence in approaching service providers and a lack of understanding as to what services are available. There have been many times when Roma people in Gateshead have ended up having difficulties, because they simply didn’t know what their rights were and this has naturally made them a very vulnerable community.

Citizens Advice at the Roma kavarna

The Roma kavarna was established at Cumbric on Coatsworth Road in Gateshead in early 2018.  The idea for the kavarna was for it to fulfil two roles. Firstly, it would be a drop-in with coffee, tea. e.t.c for the Roma community and a safe place for  them to meet. Secondly, it would be a place for the Roma to come and get the kind of help and advice with a whole range of issues that so many of them so desperately needed and they were not getting.  Before the Roma Kavarna opened in January 2018, it was arranged that Citizens Advice Gateshead would take part in the advice sessions at the kavarna.  It was to be a very successful demonstration of outreach by Citizen’s Advice Gateshead, giving the Roma community an opportunity to get support, by going out to meet them.

Staff from Citizens Advice Gateshead would arrive about the same time that the kavarna opened on a Thursday morning and would be situated within the kavarna where they could work confidentially with clients.  The kavarna always operated with a relaxed atmosphere and was never the kind of place, where clients would sit in rows waiting for a number to be called.  Instead people would go for help from the member of Citizens Advice Gateshead whenever it was their turn, usually with an interpreter to help them.  There were two interpreters and the other would be helping another client at the same time.  It was impressive to see how well the workers from Citizens Advice Bureau worked within the framework of a relaxed drop-in.   Not only did they work very professionally in terms of getting the support that people needed, but they also fitted in well to the warm and supportive atmosphere at the Kavarna. This arrangement seemed to work very well and was praised by visitors from Sheffield who came in May 2018.

The issues brought to the Roma Kavarna

 There were many issues brought to the kavarna by members of the eastern European Roma community.

In the first two months of opening issues included debt advice, help with sorting out council tax (ensuring they get rebates they are entitled to),  dealing with rent arrears and with water bills. Those being helped were not Englsish speakers, so by having excellent interpreters the kavárna was able to help Roma to sort these problems out. Universal Credit also proved to be a huge headache for many Roma and  the kavarna was able to help them also with this.

Housing was another important area where local Roma needed help. Among other problems, there were cases of landlords creating service charges for no apparent reason.  When one landlord was phoned about this he promptly hung up..... Another landlord had overcharged a family when they had moved out, charging them for removal of furniture, despite photographic evidence that the home was empty.  When the families allowed it, as sometimes they are afraid of the landlord, Environmental Health was phoned, because of a range of problems including the presence of rats, mold and there being no bathroom in a rented property.

In terms of employment, there was a case where a Roma was not paid by an agency for the last two weeks of work and wasn't sent a P45.  People were still worried about employers, who are often also their landlords. Consequently there is not always anything that could be done at the moment as some are afraid of losing their jobs and/or their homes.

People needed to have National Insurance numbers or have a child registered as one year old.  There were still numerous Roma families who were 'off the radar' and not receiving the benefits they needed and were entitled to. They didn't know their rights and as a result they were vulnerable to exploitation by landlords and employers.

In March 2018, there were more issues. Again there were a lot of families with issues around Universal Credit. We also helped families to get reductions in their Council Tax, which could take up to one and a half hours each time.

There were also a lot of debt problems to help people with. These problems included debt while paying for electricity, gas, council tax, water e.t.c.  Getting families onto direct debits would not have helped as they found their paying going up and down so much.

There was also the issue of families were getting help from organisations like Bridge House, without understanding the amount that they had to pay it back. The kavarna helped families to apply for bridging loans, which were interest free.

Housing issues continued to be prominent in the work.  Many families were living in bad conditions, with landlords who showed a distinct lack of interest.  We tried to contact Environmental Health in at least one instance, as the landlord didn't want to do anything.

There were a lot of families who were not registered with dentists.  This was a carry over from their lives in the Czech Republic or Slovakia, where Roma were often treated brutally by dentists, with operations undertaken without anesthetic. They also didn't know that low-paid families could receive free dental treatment in this country.

Many families also were not aware that they could receive personal Independent Payments (PIPs).

The work continued in April 2018. Helping people with debt problems continued to be a major concern and preoccupation of the Gateshead Roma  Kavárna Project in April.  Debt was a huge issue with the community in many respects, especially with regards to Universal Credit.  For people who were struggling with the language barrier, the applications for Universal Credit could be extremely challenging.  As well as Universal Credit, we were dealing with helping people to gain Council Tax reductions and Personal Independence Payments.

Issues with housing and landlords also continued to be a major concern as the work continued. Staff at the kavarna had to call Environmental Health in order to help people gain their rights, although clients still worried about us doing this, because of pressure from landlords. It was explained that landlords couldn't kick tenants out of their homes in the middle of the day. The key was letting people know what their rights were. Landlords knew that families were in vulnerable situations; on occasions families left their homes with their suitcases, without realising that the eviction should not be taking place.

The work of the Kavárna Drop-in on Coatsworth Road continued during June.   Hard on the heels of the news that £26 000 in unclaimed benefits had been found in the previous two and a half months, debt work continued to be an important area of our work.   In July 2018, there continued to be issues around debt and housing.

Even though it was the heart of the summer holiday, August 2018 was another busy month at the kavarna.  There were Roma families who were self-employed and didn't know that they had to do tax returns and were not sure how to do it online.  Consequently, they were getting fined for things they were not aware of   People were trying to get employment, but they were struggling with tax returns - these could take up to an hour to do.

On another occasion the kavarna helped a client who was being fined for ticking the wrong box for a prescription, while  another had received an annual pack from HMRC, which she thought was the new form to fill-in, but didn't know to phone HMRC and speak to them, but their child tax credits had been stopped. Around the same time, the kavarna also dealt with a change of address issue regarding HMRC.

The kavarna has seen families with all sorts of issues with Universal Credit, Personal Independence Payments, housing benefit, council tax, homelessness and as ever debts. In one case the landlord had given a family a one week notice, as he had sold the house and the family didn't know that they could raise the issue and could not be evicted in this time span.  We also found that many families did not know what they were entitled to...  They were getting paid under the minimum wage and often there were two families in the same home.  In one case, there was one family working for a landlord in a car wash with the children not in school, but didn't know they could get help. The children were in school within two weeks.

It was found that there was a huge trust issue and landlords/employers took advantage of them. The kavarna had their clients' trust.  For 18 years there had been no project for the Roma min Gateshead and now service providers in Gateshead had shown that they were been supportive, because the staff at the kavarna had been able to reach this community.  But sadly, there were still low expectations of support among that community.

In September 2018, the kavarna continued to help members of the Roma community with their problems. including issues around gaining their human rights in various areas, mostly the same areas in which they had been helped for the last 8 months.  There were still huge problems within the community regarding debt, exploitation and not always knowing where to turn for help. Indeed the kavarna was still getting clients waiting outside the drop-in before its opening at 9.30.

At the kavarna, staff continued to deal with housing issues. In one example, one client was re-housed; the home they were living in had rats in it, so the staff at the kavarna got the council involved and officers from Gateshead Council visited the property. Within two weeks, the family were re-housed in a much better 4-bedroomed flat and didn't even have to pay a deposit beforehand.

The kavarna also dealt with a homelessness case, when a young Roma woman was kicked out by her family.  In response, Shelter was contacted and consequently she was able to find accommodation.

We have been busy dealing with more enquiries concerning Universal Credit and debt problems have been part of our work again.

We have also been dealing with housing issues. In one example, one client was re-housed; the home they were living in had rats in it, so we got the council involved and officers from Gateshead Council visited the property. Within two weeks, the family were re-housed in a much better 4-bedroomed flat and didn't even have to pay a deposit beforehand.

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After a break over Christmas and New Year the kavarna opened again in January 2019.

The kavarna continued to help clients with problems connected to debt, benefits and other issues.

February 2019 was another very busy month.  Clients were helped with a wide variety of issues. These included debt advice, gas and electricity payments, an application for social housing, an NHS form regarding a prescription, a Child Benefit form and a Court Order issue.

March 2019 was another busy and successful month for the Gateshead Roma Kavarna. Again there were numerous enquiries. These included an Energy Query, a request for advice about Tax Credits, Carers Allowance and setting up an application for Universal Credit.  HMRC issue with Working tax Credit, Council tax and housing issues.  Then there was a letter from the council saying that a landlord should be licensed.  There was  also a lady who didn't know how to explain issues to her boss.

The kavarna continued to be busy during April. As part of their outreach, Citizens Advice Gateshead dealt with another PIP application. It concerned an appeal and a complicated set of choices, which the client had to make. There was also a query about an application for Employment Support Allowance. There was another query regarding working and tax.  There was another query about Disability Allowance with regards to mobility and mental health issues. Another query was with regards to somebody not knowing that they had to re-apply for PIP after going back to Eastern Europe for four months and the client was also concerned about gaining Settled Status after Brexit. The kavarna also dealt with an issue regarding HMRC and renewal date for the end of the tax year.

The kavarna even had a client asking about Disability Allowance who had come all the way from Middlesbrough. It was an issue regarding the payment of Disability Allowance being stopped after client returned to Eastern Europe after the death of father and mother having a heart attack. It was explained to the client that they needed proof about being in this country, proof which he has from a doctor  - he was told that he must go to a court hearing and prove that he was in the country.  There was also a query about tax and the HMRC and we had another client with a PIP application.

Then there was a client wanting to sign in for Universal Credit; a client who had stopped working the previous December. Somebody said that they were working, and clients had to write it on their Home Journal, but there was a miscommunication from the manager.  We also had a confirmation of a births register for a passport application for Czech Citizenship. There was another client who had not put the date on a form for car ownership and wanted to know what a Dental Exemption Certificate was.

The kavarma also dealt with another PIP Appeal, which had gone to a tribunal and a Universal Credit 50 form.

Around this time the kavarna held a meeting with Judith Wood-Archer from Citizens Advice Gateshead.   This was a very positive meeting, particularly concentrating on support for Roma in Newcastle.

The kavarna alsohelped with a tax enquiry and helping with passport enquiry and getting a dentist's appointment sorted out. Staff wrote and got printed out a letter for a client regarding a work dismissal issue. Staff also registered somebody to vote. There was a client who has an appeal against a PIP decision and wants to make a new claim in case the appeal fails. He was told to get a new form and bring it in.

The work of Citizens Advice Gateshead at the Roma kavarna

The work performed by Citizens Advice Gateshead at the kavarna was crucial to the overall functioning of the drop-in. The staff who came from Citizens Advice Gateahead were always, without fail, proefssional in their duties and very helpful. They were also very good at understanding the cultural isseus that they needed to get to grips with.

The expertise that the staff from Citzens Advice Gateshead were able to bring to the kavarna was particularly important with respects to dealing with debts and helping clients to get the benefits that they desperately needed, but were often not aware that they could apply for. They were excellent at helping clients to deal with appeals regarding their benefits.

The great benefit that Citizens Advice Gateshead was bringing to the work of the kavarna was probably brought home in the most dramatic way by the fact that in spring 2018, it was discovered that £26 000 in unclaimed benefits was found in the previous two and a half months. This was really great to hear and was also very helpful in gaining support from Gateshead Council as we could prove that we were helping to benefit not just individuals but the local economy as a whole.

Staff from CAG were also able to help with numerous technical issues that helped the clients in many ways. The expertise of the CAG staff has been very much appreciated.

Conclusion

There are a number of important conclusions to draw from this work.

Firstly, it is clear that the eastern European Roma in Gateshead and a re a very marginalised community, many of whom do not have a very good grasp of the English language. As a result of this, they are often unaware of what their rights are and how they can improve their lives.

Another is that the community need to be reached out to; it is important to go to see them, in a place where they feel safe and secure. That was one of the most important aspects of the work that Citizens Advice Gateshead did at the kavarna and it helped enormously to encourage the members of the community that the serrvices of CAG were available to them as much as anybody else.

The work of CAG at the kavarna also proved that the community can an be helped and that, while they may be deemed a ‘hard to reach’ community, they were most certainly not an ‘impossible to reach community’.

Peter Sagar, A Living Tradition CIC, December 2021