**A Living Tradition CIC**

**Gateshead Roma K****avárna Project**

**Report for March 2020**

We were open for the first three Thursday mornings of March, but in line with government policies we have closed the drop-ins at the kavarna indefinitely. On the third week we were only open long enough to explain to people what was happening. We will, however, continue to provide a much needed service to the Roma community in Gateshead as the Covid-19 crisis unfolds.

In the three weeks we were open, we continued to provide a vital service to the Roma Community in Gateshead. We spent time giving clients information about about Covid-19 and what to do about it. We also helped those who were worried about paying for their housing and the usual PIPs related enquiries and helped a client to put together a c.v.

We have now begun to develop an online kavarna through a facebook page. This was set up on Friday 20th March and by Monday 23rd, it already had 300 families signed up to it. They are asking many questions, which we are endeavouring to deal with. It is clear that we are going to be busier than ever throughout this worrying time. We have begun to handle a huge number of enquiries, but it has been difficult to contact many of the important benefit and housing organisations, as they are often permanently engaged as so many other people are having to contact them at present.

As the crisis has developed and the lockdown progressed, so more problems have come to light. People are needing to be helped through a foodbank, some can’t get through to Universal Credit and many members of the community do no know how to apply online. Other members of the Roma community have had their benefits stopped because they haven’t filled in the form for Personal Independence Payments.

There are also members of the Roma community who can’t afford to pay rent or council tax. When they phone the council about council tax or housing, they are being told to apply for universal credit, which they don’t know how to do. We have tried to work through Facebook and Skype to show them how to do it, but it is taking too long. We have contacted the council and the local M.P. to try and get help with this. The local M.P.’s office kindly passed the information on to the leader of Gateshead Council. We also have had cases of depression, where people are staying on their own.

We have passed on vital information about the situation to the Roma community from organisations such as Northumbria Police, advice from councils about paying Council Tax, if someone is struggling to pay it because of coronavirus income loss and announcements from the government about what is happening during the lockdown. We passed on information about changes to universal credit and working tax credits due to start in April. We have also passed the information on to a youth project in Newcastle, which caters for a large number of young people from an Eastern European Roma background.

When the kavarna was open we had sterling support from Gemarts, who were able to begin a creative project with members of the Roma before the kavarna had to be closed down. Hopefully this work can be started up again later in the year.

The Covid-19 crisis has again reinforced the precarious situation that members of the Roma community are in. As a marginalised community, they are particularly vulnerable, both to the virus itself and to the knock-on effects from it. We can only hope that those in precarious employment are not being forced to keep working in a way that will put them and others in danger. If prevented from working, we can only hope that they are able to find ways of maintaining themselves and their families financially.

We have been working with the Roma Rights Path Project, who are involved with the Roma community and we are getting referrals from them. Consequently we are more becoming even more busy now.

We had excellent support again from Citizens Advice Gateshead until the Covid-19 crisis prevented this. We look forward to working with them again in the future.

We have continued to give out free food kindly donated by Greggs until we closed the kavarna.

Many thanks again as ever to Greggs, Citizens Advice Gateshead. NE First Credit Union, Northumbria Police, Gateshead Council, Gemarts and especially Awards for All for their continued support.

Peter Sagar, Company Secretary, A Living Tradition CIC, and Irma Karchnakova, interpreter and worker, April 2020