



**Romano Lav**



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ALLIANCE**

WORKING TOGETHER TO COMBAT POVERTY

# Rights to Housing and the Environment:

## Experiences of the Roma Community in Govanhill

**December 2024**



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The Poverty Alliance is Scotland's anti-poverty network. Together with our members, we influence policy and practice, support communities to challenge poverty, provide evidence through research and build public support for the solutions to tackle poverty. Our members include grassroots community groups, academics, large national NGOs, voluntary organisations, statutory organisations, trade unions, and faith groups.

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Romano Lav are a community-based organisation and registered charity working in Govanhill, Glasgow with the local migrant Roma communities. Romano Lav work within the wider community on a varied and diverse range of projects that share the core principles of being Roma led, beneficial to the Roma communities and empower Roma voices.

### **Disclaimer**

The views in this report are those of the researchers and opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the views of the Poverty Alliance, Romano Lav, or our members.

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## Summary

The Roma community in Govanhill, Glasgow, face significant challenges to attaining their right to adequate housing. This report presents findings from a participatory action research project by Romano Lav in partnership with the Poverty Alliance which explored Romani people's experiences of social and private housing, awareness of housing rights and experiences of the local environment through the use of local parks in Govanhill. Findings from the survey show that the right to adequate housing is not being realised for members of the community.

**Key findings** include:

**Housing quality:** Most respondents rated their housing as poor or very poor, with no respondents describing their homes as excellent. Significant issues included damp, mould, and pest infestations.

**Mental and physical health impacts:** Poor housing conditions are impacting both the mental and physical health of members of the community. Overcrowding, lack of hot water, and insecure communal spaces contribute to stress, anxiety, and health issues, with many community members highlighting the impact of mould and damp on their health.

**Lack of housing support and awareness:** Many respondents reported limited knowledge of their housing rights and lack of awareness of support services, with 70% unaware of their rights in respect to eviction.

**Local environment and parks:** The quality of local parks, particularly Govanhill Park, is a concern. Issues include overcrowding, inadequate play equipment, poor cleanliness, and the presence of rats.

**Human rights:** The report suggests that the right to housing, health and a healthy environment, are not currently being met for many members of the Roma community in Govanhill.

**Key recommendations** from our research include calls to action for multiple actors.

### **Scottish Government and local authorities**

- Increase awareness of support services like housing advice and the Scottish Welfare Fund, supported by targeted government funding for organisations supporting marginalised communities.
- Adequately funding the delivery of new social homes through the Affordable Housing Supply Programme, and allocating funding to ensure that existing social homes are well-maintained and suitably adapted to meet people's needs.
- Ensure all tenants are aware of, and can exercise, their rights by making advocacy services fully available and accessible.

### **Glasgow City Council**

- Conduct culturally tailored outreach to increase residents' awareness of housing rights, eviction procedures, and tenant protections, with multilingual resources.
- Enhance local parks and communities by addressing cleanliness, overcrowding, and pest control, and expanding recreational facilities for families.
- Establish regular consultations with the Roma community to ensure participation, accountability, and empowerment in addressing housing and environmental needs.

## Housing Associations and private landlords

- Ensure prompt maintenance responses for issues like damp, mould, and pest infestations, with accountability mechanisms for social and private tenants.
- Improve security and maintenance in communal spaces to prevent unauthorised access and reduce anti-social behaviour.

## Introduction

This report presents the findings of a participatory action research project carried out by members of Romano Lav, a Roma community organisation based in Govanhill Glasgow, in partnership with the Poverty Alliance, Scotland's anti-poverty network. This research was conducted as part of the Poverty Alliance's [Rights in Action](#) programme working with communities across Scotland to raise awareness of how human rights can be used as a tool to tackle poverty, to increase their capacity to tackle human rights issues and create a supportive community of practice.

Focusing on the key issues of housing and the local environment, the research employed a human-rights approach to highlight the lived experiences and lack of rights-realisation faced by the Roma community. After human rights training, the right to adequate housing and a healthy environment were identified as a key human rights concern as many Roma people live in inadequate housing facing problems of overcrowding, exploitative landlords, high rents and poor conditions.<sup>i</sup>

The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) states that the human right to housing is "of central importance for the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights."<sup>ii</sup> This research explored key aspects of the right to adequate housing under ICESCR including security of tenure, whether housing is habitable, and experiences of services and infrastructure.

In July 2024, a survey was conducted with 45 people from the Roma community who live in Govanhill, Glasgow, to explore their experiences of both private and social housing and the local environment. This research was based on a small sample and is not intended to be representative of the experiences of the whole Roma community but instead provides insights into some of the key challenges being faced.

Researchers from Romano Lav played a central role in all stages of the project, ensuring that the research was informed by local knowledge, expertise, and cultural insight. Using a participatory action research approach, the project amplifies the voices of the Roma community and advocates for improvements in housing conditions and the quality of the local environment.

## The research

### Research design

Our project began in January 2024, when a group of community researchers came together to select a research topic that addressed a rights-issue in the community. Housing and the local environment were selected due to the lack of rights realisation in these areas currently, and historically, for the Roma community in Govanhill. Following training in human rights and research design, the group decided to carry out a survey with a mix of closed questions and open responses to give greater insight into the Roma community's experiences of housing and the local environment in Govanhill. The survey questions were developed to capture the key components of the right to housing outlined in the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights<sup>iii</sup>. The questions were also developed to encompass key components of the right to a healthy environment with support from the Environmental Rights Centre for Scotland.

### How we collected the data

To collect the survey data, we held a community survey event. This involved inviting members of the community to our cultural centre in Govanhill. We selected this location as it is in the heart of the community and is a familiar and accessible space.

At the event, we provided everyone with an information sheet which was available in English, Romanian, Czech, and Slovak (to ensure that people had access to the information in their first language). If the person was happy to proceed, we then gave them a survey to complete. We also made sure that there was a staff member on hand who spoke each of the community languages and could assist anyone who required further information and/or support to read through the information sheet and fill out the survey. We provided a participation voucher to thank people for their time and contribution to the research. We provided food and drinks at the event for everyone who attended.

## **Analysis**

Once the survey was completed, we uploaded the anonymised surveys to MS Forms and Excel. Following this, we held analysis sessions to analyse the data relating to three themes, demographic data (including housing information), housing conditions and rights, and perspectives of the local area and greenspaces.

## **Who took part**

Forty-five surveys were completed by members of the Roma community from the Govanhill area. We collected sociodemographic data relating to age, gender, housing circumstances and child poverty priority family groups. The sample included:

- Age: aged 16-24 (22%), aged 25-34 (18%), aged 35-44 (42%), aged 45-64 (16%) and aged 65+ (2%).
- Gender: 38 participants provided information relating to gender. Of these, 25 were female and 13 were male.
- Housing circumstances: 49% of the participants lived in social housing, 38% rented from a private landlord and 13% reported that they lived with family or friends. None of the participants owned their own home.
- Child poverty priority family group: 26 of the participants lived in households with three or more children, 10 were single parents, five had a child under the age of one, three lived in a household where a child or adult had a disability or health condition, and one participant was a parent under the age of 25.

## Findings

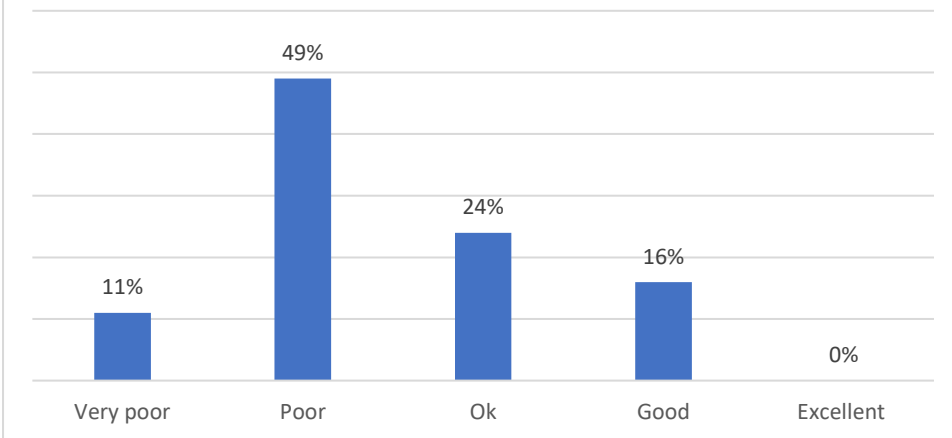
### Experiences of housing

#### **Quality of housing and issues faced**

For the survey respondents, the condition of their housing was a major concern. As can be seen in the graph below, the majority reported living in poor or very poor housing, with only 16% of respondents describing their housing as 'good', and none describing their housing as excellent.

The most frequent response for respondents living in social (11 participants) and in private rented housing was that the condition of their housing was poor (eight participants). None of the private rented participants described their housing as good compared to six participants who were renting from a housing association.

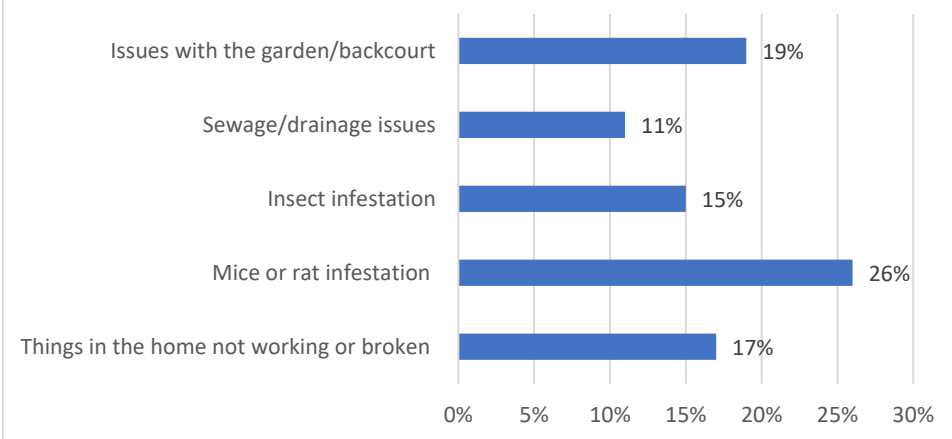
Figure 1: How would you describe the quality of your housing?



We wanted to know what housing issues people have faced in the past year in their homes. We asked about specific issues that we knew to be an issue from our work in the community (see figure 2).

The lack of pest control and subsequent infestation was raised throughout the responses and represents a major finding of this research. A quarter of respondents (26%) reported experiencing mice or rat infestation (in addition to 15% reporting insect infestation) in the past year, suggesting that pest control is a significant issue for the wider community, and crucially is not being kept under control by duty bearers both in terms of being addressed by social landlords and their being sufficient enforcement of regulation of private rental properties and accessible accountability mechanisms.

Figure 2: Housing issues experienced in the past year



One of the most common issues mentioned in the survey open responses was mice infestations. One respondent stated that "The mice are everywhere, especially night-time is terror" and another respondent reported that they "can't sleep because of mice and mice poop everywhere". Others described the severe distress it causes: "The mice stress us; they are on our bed and clothes" Another commented that when their home was infested by mice "nobody helped", highlighting a lack of action and accountability on this serious housing and health issue. Mice infestation clearly contributes to anxiety and discomfort, in addition to the risk to physical health caused by mice



infestation. As noted above, insect infestation is another issue faced by members of the community. One respondent shared that their home was infested by cockroaches that were “climbing on us and the children.”

Overall, responses highlight how unresolved housing issues, particularly mice infestations, lack of hot water, and overcrowding, are contributing to a cycle of stress, anxiety, and severely impacting both mental and physical health for many families.

### **Housing conditions**

The survey included a question on whether community members agreed or disagreed with a range of statements relating to their housing conditions. The survey results included:

- Just over half (53%) disagreed that their ‘current accommodation meets my or my family’s needs’.
- 57% disagreed with the statement that ‘the property where I live is in a good condition’.
- 57% also disagreed with the statement that ‘my home is free of damp and mould’.
- Most respondents agreed that they have an effective heating system (90%) and that their rent was affordable (75%). For private rented households who responded to this question (12), five disagreed that their housing was affordable and seven agreed that it was.

Whilst the vast majority reported that they had an effective heating system, inadequate heating systems still surfaced as an issue, with respondents sharing that they “*can't take a shower*” or are “*freezing in the winter and can't dry our clothes*”. The lack of basic household amenities created a situation where one community member reported their family having to “*wash like the old times*” due to not having access to proper washing facilities in their home. These responses highlight the impact on daily living of a housing system that is not provide adequate standards of housing.

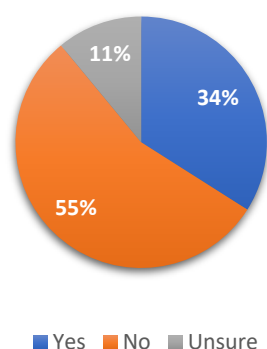
Communal spaces such as stairwells were reported as not being secure, leading to “*random people*” gaining access, and that communal spaces were used at times as a space for people to take drugs. A response from a participant included: “*The smell of weed in the close area and not sanitary, scared as random people get in the stairs.*” The lack of security clearly impacts on feelings of safety and illustrates the need for housing providers to take responsibility for shared areas that are part of people’s homes which contributed to people feeling “*scared*” in their own homes.

### **Impacts on physical and mental health**

We know from living and working in the community that housing issues are having an impact on our community’s mental and physical health. To understand more, we asked if housing conditions affected the physical or mental health of people in the home. Just over half of the survey respondents (55%) said that housing conditions did not affect physical or mental health and 34% reported that they did have an impact (with 11% unsure) (see figure 3).



Figure 3: Do the conditions of your housing affect the physical or mental health of you or the people you live with?



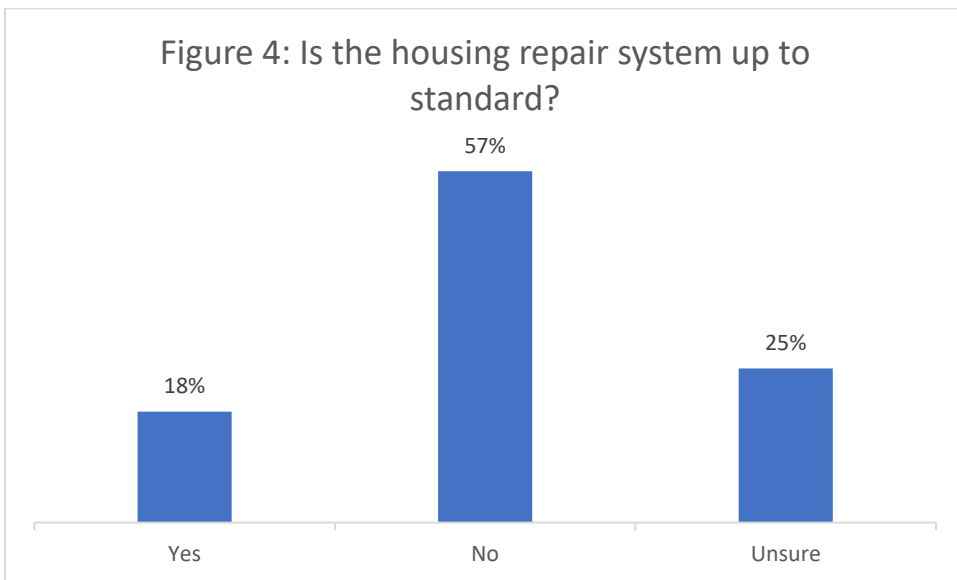
The consequences of poor housing conditions are clear in many responses, with several people detailing the impact on their physical and mental health. The open responses reveal the significant toll that poor housing conditions are taking on residents' physical and mental health. Many respondents expressed that their living situations are a source of constant stress, with one person explicitly stating, *"It affects our mental health"*, while others noted that the situation is *"causing stress"* and leading to depression, *"Our mental health is going down into depression"*.

Poor maintenance and overcrowding were also raised as issues affecting quality of life, with one respondent feeling *"constantly drained by issues with the house"* and another reporting, *"We are overcrowded in this flat"*. Some community members linked stress directly to the lack of basic amenities: *"Constant stress because don't have hot water."* These comments reflect how unresolved housing issues contribute to stress and discomfort for families living in inadequate conditions. As detailed above, many of the community members have large families, and the impact of the lack of living space and privacy was reported: *"Me and my family don't have enough space, and we don't have any privacy."*

The impact and risk posed by living in poor housing conditions and homes affected by damp and mould was highlighted in several responses. For example, an open response to the survey highlighted how *"damp and mould is affecting our health."* The impact on the health was present in many responses, with an awareness of the link between mould and poor health clear to both the respondent and their family: *"We have health issues and the mould in the house is causing it."* Some respondents reported being frequently ill due to the conditions of their housing: *"We get sick all the time, and we get better when we are away from the house."* The responses highlight that the right to housing remains unrealised for many people in the community, and that this has a major impact in both peoples mental and physical health. Furthermore, these responses highlight the connection between the right to housing and the right to health, and of the impact on the community when rights are not being met.

#### **Is the housing repair system up to standard?**

When asked if the housing repair system is up to standard, a majority (57%) of respondents reported that they did not think the housing repair system was up to standard (figure 4). Of respondents to this question who lived in social housing (13), only four reported that the repair system was up to standard. Of private rented tenants who responded to this question (12), only two said that the system for repairs was up to standard.

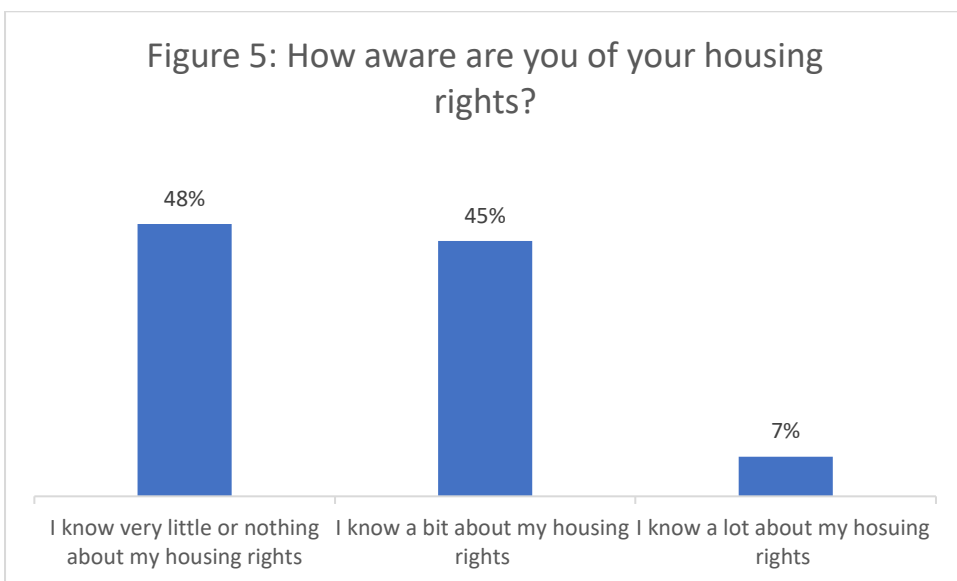


We asked people to provide examples of issues they had when seeking to have housing issues repaired. The responses from community members highlight inadequate repair systems and processes. One respondent said that *"They [housing provider] don't fix issues when they should"*, with another sharing that *"They [housing provider] didn't repair my shower for 6 months"*, whilst another reported *"problems with washing machine and repair people not repairing"*.

The lack of access to repairs and impacts on basic needs was also evident in the responses. One respondent described having *"no warm water"*, whilst another highlighted similarly that their *"boiler doesn't work properly"*. The lack of action when reporting issues was typified by one respondent who stated simply that *"My landlord doesn't want to repair anything."*

**Knowledge of housing rights**

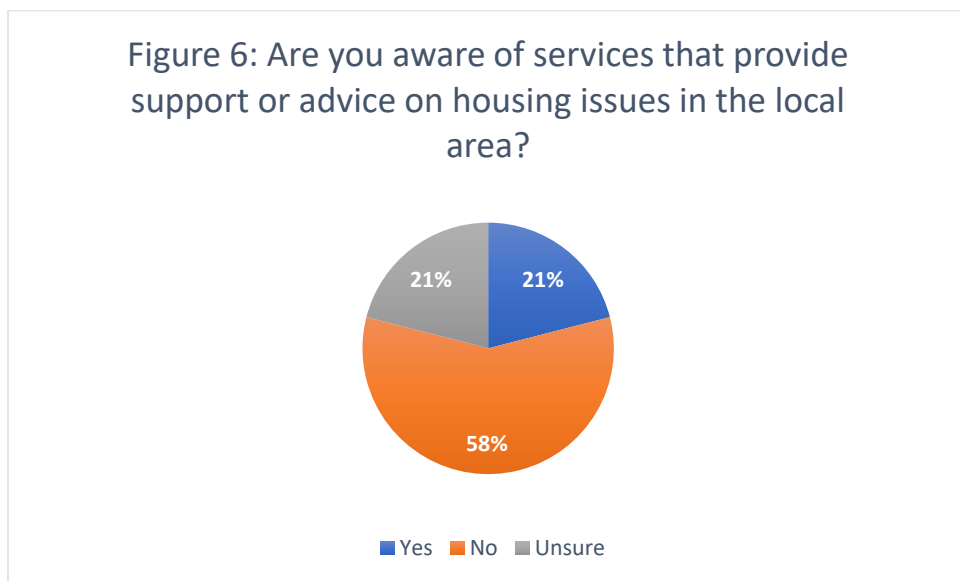
When we asked how aware people were generally of their housing rights, 48% reported knowing 'very little or nothing', 45% that they knew 'a bit', with only 7% reporting that they knew 'a lot' (figure 5). This highlights a major gap in knowledge of housing rights amongst the community members who took part in the survey and suggests a failure on the part of a range of duty bearers to empower people to name and claim their rights.



We are aware through our work in the community of many instances of members of the Roma community being evicted from their homes without notice and being subject to rental agreements that are not legal. We asked if people knew their rights if a landlord told them to leave their home without a notice letter. The majority of respondents (70%) said that they did not. This highlights the risk of potential exploitation of people in the community. Given that we know that this problem is not new, this illustrates a lack of empowerment and support for the community and a barrier to the realisation of the right to housing.

### Housing support and the Scottish Welfare Fund

We also asked if there are services that provide support or advice on housing issues in the local area: 58% answered no, 21% yes, and 21% said that they did not know (figure 6).



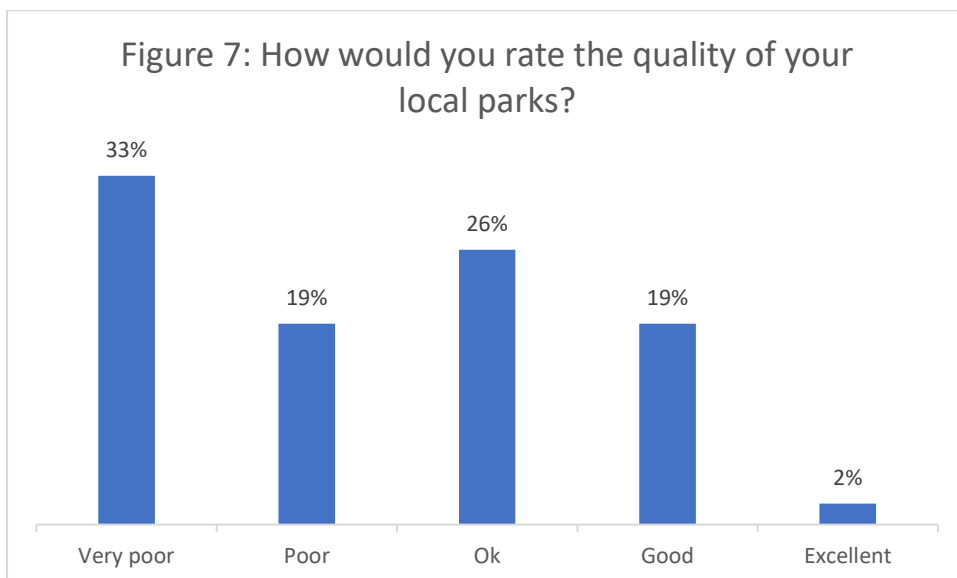
Whilst we are aware that there are housing support services in the area, these figures suggest that there is a lack of awareness of those that currently exist and a need for services in the area to continue outreach efforts.

We also asked if people knew that they could access the Scottish Welfare Fund to help with a financial emergency to provide items to keep your home to a liveable standard: over three-quarters (77%) answered no, with 23% responding yes.

The lack of awareness of support highlights a public issue that is being experienced as a private trouble by the community. People need and want to access support, but a lack of awareness represents a major barrier for members of the community.

### Experiences of local parks

The local parks, particularly Govanhill Park, represent a place of leisure, community space, wellbeing and can be considered a cultural focal point of the community. We asked how people would rate the quality of their local parks and found that the quality ratings were low, with only 21% of respondents rating the quality as good or excellent.



For people to fully enjoy and benefit from the local greenspaces, it is important that they feel welcome. This is particularly important amongst communities such as ours who face discrimination and marginalisation. The survey also included a question on whether people felt welcomed in their local parks and greenspaces. Almost half of the respondents said that they felt welcome (47%) and just under a third reported that they did not feel welcome.

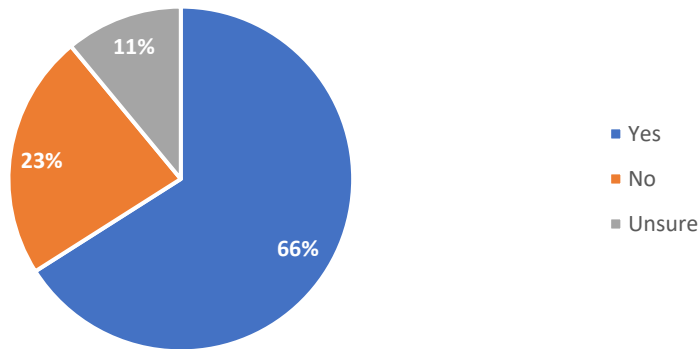
For those who reported not feeling welcome, we asked why. These responses spoke of the lack of facilities on offer, and the lack of cleanliness. One respondent expressed frustration with the limited availability of toys and play equipment for children, saying, *"Because all the toys for kids are always taken and I have to go home with my kids crying."* Others highlighted a shortage of seating and equipment: *"Not enough benches and kids' games."* Overcrowding, a frequent issue reported about housing experiences, also emerged in responses discussing local parks, with one person stating that the park is *"too crowded,"* and another explaining, *"It's always overcrowded, and my kids can't play"*.

Waste and rubbish were also significant concerns. Several responses highlighted cleanliness being a major issue with one person highlighting that the area around the park has *"a lot of waste and rubbish"*, with another adding that *"The rubbish smells beside the park"*. In addition, the presence of *"too many rats"* was raised as a reason why the park was not considered to be a welcoming and safe space.

Govanhill Park, in particular, is a central point of community life. We asked in our survey if people use Govanhill Park, and 96% replied that they did. This suggests that improvements to the local environment should include a focus on Govanhill Park. Its central place in the community demands that this park should be at the standard expected of all Glasgow's greenspaces. A key step is ensuring that the park is clean and tidy, which Govanhill Park has been reported as not being due to the issue of rats' infestation which has been previously covered in the local and national press<sup>iv</sup>. Responses to the survey found that the majority of parents (66%) think that the park is safe for children to play in (figure 8).

Overall, the responses suggest that overcrowding, inadequate recreational facilities, and poor waste management are major issues affecting families' use of local greenspaces and quality of life.

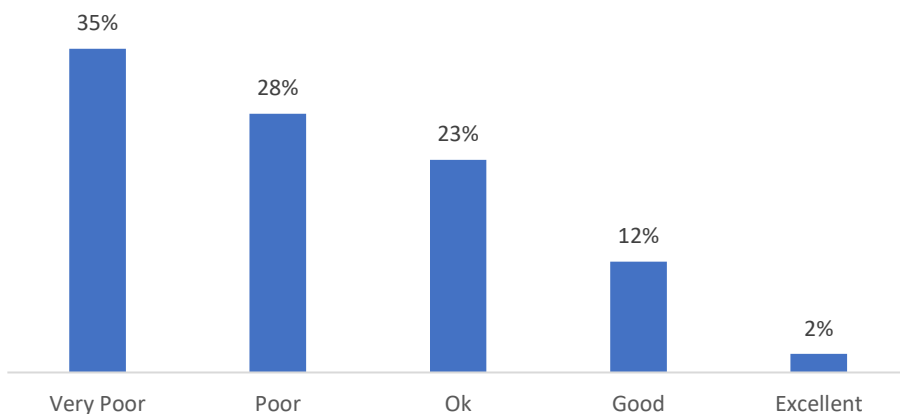
Figure 8: Do you think Govanhill Park safe for children to play in?



#### How well do the council keep the local area tidy?

The survey found that community members who took part in the research have a generally low level of satisfaction with the council's efforts to keep the local area tidy. We asked people to rate their levels of satisfaction on a scale of 1-5 (1 being the lowest), with an average rating of 2.19 out of 5. Of this, 35% gave the lowest rating of 1 (see figure below). This suggests that for the community members who took part, the council is not doing enough to keep the local environment tidy and maintain the right to a healthy environment.

Figure 9: How would you rate how well the council keep the local area tidy?



We also asked people to rate the quality of the local streets/pavements in the local area. Again, responses illustrated dissatisfaction, with an average rating of 2.23, with 42% of respondents giving the lowest score.

#### What could be done to improve housing and/or the local area?

Community members shared their thoughts on what could be done to improve housing and the local area. Many shared the need to for the area to be cleaner, highlighting the need to "clean the mess", and for "more cleaning".

This included calls for “more flowers” and for the area to look generally “more beautiful and clean”. There was also a strong focus on the need to improve the local area for children. Suggestions included “more kids play areas” and “more pretty and stable kid’s toys, more benches”.

The need for better housing provision was also raised. Community members highlighted that there was a need for “more affordable housing”, reflecting that “there is too many people homeless and overcrowded”. Finally, the need for greater support services was raised, particularly in relation to families with one community member calling for “more services for families to get support”.

Next steps we want to see

This report concludes by providing recommendations for action to ensure that the Roma community in Glasgow have access to both adequate housing and a healthy environment. By framing our research within a human rights context, it underscores that they are not radical demands but essential measures for ensuring dignity, equality, and rights-realisation for all. The changes we want to see are directed at multiple actors including the Scottish Government, Glasgow City Council, housing associations and private landlords.

### **Housing Associations and private landlords**

- **Improve housing conditions and maintenance:** Ensure prompt and effective responses to maintenance requests, especially for issues like damp, mould, and pest infestations. Accessible accountability mechanisms to be in place for both social and private tenants when standards are not being met.
- **Enhancing security in communal areas:** Improve the security and maintenance of communal areas, such as stairwells and entryways, to prevent unauthorised access and reduce anti-social behaviour.

### **Glasgow City Council**

- **Improvement of pest control measures:** Local authorities to develop a comprehensive pest control plan for areas such as Govanhill that are particularly affected. This should include regular pest control inspections and treatments, particularly in high-risk buildings and communal spaces.
- **Investment in the local area including increasing council efforts to maintain cleanliness:** The local council to improve local parks, particularly Govanhill Park, by addressing issues of cleanliness, overcrowding, and pest control. Increase play equipment, seating, and recreational facilities, making the park a safe, welcoming space for children and families. Strengthen waste management and sanitation services in the local area, ensuring that streets, pavements, and public spaces are well-maintained.

### **Scottish Government and local authorities**

- **Raise awareness of housing rights and support and ensure access to appropriate support services:** community outreach initiatives to educate residents on their housing rights, particularly on issues like eviction procedures, repair obligations, and tenant protections. Making advocacy services fully available and accessible to ensure all tenants are aware of, and can exercise their rights. Staff should also receive Roma cultural training, and all information should be in multiple languages.
- **Increase awareness of local support services,** such as housing advice and the Scottish Welfare Fund. This should include additional funding from the Scottish Government that recognises the Roma community as currently being far from rights realisation.

### **Scottish Government**

- **Adequately funding the delivery of new social homes through the Affordable Housing Supply Programme,** and allocating funding to ensure that existing social homes are well-maintained and suitably adapted to meet people’s needs.

## All

- **Community participation:** Duty-bearers to establish regular consultations with the Roma community to understand ongoing housing and environmental needs. This process should have strong participation and accountability procedures built in to ensure that trust is built and community members to be empowered to name and claim their rights.

## Suggestions for future research

There are several areas we suggest for future research in the area.

- **Increased survey size:** Our research reached a relatively small number of community members. We therefore suggest a larger survey to better understand the scale of the issue and collect further insights from the community.
- **Children's experience:** It is clear from our findings that children are being impacted by the current housing and local environment situation. Research that engages children is needed that recognises them as rights-holders and draws on their perspectives.
- **Policy gaps:** Our research did not focus on policy gaps and potential solutions. Work in this area is clearly needed to understand and produce policy that promotes rights-realisation rather than denial and improves the lives of the people in our community and others facing similar issues.
- **Repair and maintenance:** Research that maps and explores the repair and maintenance processes would be beneficial in helping us to understand the service that people currently experience, accountability, and solutions for a service that appears to be inadequate for the community.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the findings from the research illustrate a housing situation where families' rights to adequate housing, and in respect to the prevalence of mould and damp, the right to health, are not being realised. These issues are directly affecting children and adults in the community. Our report highlights that poor housing conditions and inadequate local infrastructure are not only infringing upon the right to adequate housing but have serious impacts on people's mental and physical health. The experiences of the Roma community highlighted in this report underscores the need for immediate, coordinated action from housing authorities, and national and local government to address these issues, improve quality of life, and tackle the marginalisation and discrimination faced by the Roma community in Govanhill.



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<sup>i</sup> Romano Lav (2020) *Briefing Paper: Coronavirus (COVID-19) and Roma Communities in Scotland*. Available at: [https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/601e5c899b255f2ab1aa7bd3/6195129b9b1142d698b34dff\\_Briefing%20Paper%20-%20COVID-19%20and%20Roma%20communities%20\(1\).pdf](https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/601e5c899b255f2ab1aa7bd3/6195129b9b1142d698b34dff_Briefing%20Paper%20-%20COVID-19%20and%20Roma%20communities%20(1).pdf)

<sup>ii</sup> United Nations (nd) *The Human Right to Adequate Housing*. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-housing/human-right-adequate-housing>

<sup>iii</sup> Ibid

<sup>iv</sup> Glasgow Times (2023) *Residents hit out over Glasgow playground overrun by rats*. Available at: <https://www.glasgowtimes.co.uk/news/scottish-news/23587020.residents-hit-glasgow-playground-overrun-rats/>

STV (2023) *Angry locals protest over rat-infested children's playpark*. Available at: <https://news.stv.tv/west-central/angry-locals-protest-over-rat-infested-childrens-playpark-in-govanhill>