



## **The health status of Gypsies and Travellers**

### Evidence – health status

Although evidence on the health status of Gypsies and Travellers has been hard to come by, in recent years two reports have addressed this problem. In 2002, the South West Public Health Observatory reviewed the various small scale research studies that had been published to date. In 2004 the University of Sheffield, under a commission from the Department of Health, published the results of their research which compared, in a robust way, the health status of Gypsies and Travellers with the health status of a number of comparator communities. The broad findings are summarised as follows.

- ❑ The overall health status of Gypsies and Travellers is relatively poor in comparison with other disadvantaged groups and very poor compared with the general population.
- ❑ Certain health conditions and illnesses are significant for Gypsy and Traveller adults; these include anxiety, asthma, bronchitis, depression, and long-term illness.
- ❑ There are significant health issues for children, many relating to lack of immunisation.
- ❑ In addition, there are considerable risks to mothers and their babies leading up to, at, or just after birth.
- ❑ Life expectancy may be very low. (One study in Leeds revealed a life expectancy of 50 years.)

### Access to healthcare

Despite these health problems, access to healthcare is often difficult for Gypsies and Travellers. For example, many Gypsies and Travellers feel that health workers, including GPs and their staff, have a poor understanding of their needs, circumstances and culture.

Furthermore :

- ❑ Preventive care and screening may be inadequate.
- ❑ Access to initial or continuing healthcare can be very limited for Gypsies and Travellers, sometimes hampered by a lack of medical records.
- ❑ In particular, Gypsies and Travellers report considerable problems in registering with GPs and/or receiving appropriate care from GP practices.
- ❑ As a result, many Gypsies and Travellers tend to make greater use of A&E for basic health needs than the general population.

### Department of Health's response

- In response, to the research findings, the Department of Health has engaged with Gypsy and Traveller communities to discuss appropriate action. As a first step, as part of its Pacesetters Programme, over the next two to three years, the Department will be trialling innovative approaches to some of the more deep-seated health access problems experienced by Gypsies and Travellers. Further work will follow. Learning and good practice will be disseminated widely to the NHS.

Finally, sound information is the source of good planning and good commissioning. The Department of Health, and others, have successfully argued with ONS for the inclusion of a "Gypsy and Traveller" ethnic code in the 2007 Census test. If eventually included in the 2011 Census, NHS and other public bodies will be encouraged to change their ethnic monitoring systems to include "Gypsy / Traveller" as a code, and use the resulting data for better planning and commissioning.