

How you can improve the health of Gypsy/Travellers in Scotland

In Scotland, people in Gypsy/Traveller communities are dying at least a decade earlier than the rest of the population.

Gypsy/Travellers have poorer experiences of the things that help us live in good health, such as access to services, adequate housing, good education and social inclusion. They can also experience stigma and discrimination.

Gypsy/Travellers experience some of the worst physical and mental health outcomes in the UK. We need to take action to improve this.



Aim

This resource highlights practical solutions that Health Boards and Health and Social Care Partnerships have implemented to try to prevent these premature deaths, improve health and support Gypsy/Traveller communities to thrive.

It is designed for decision-makers and people working in health and care services, and provides some actions you can take to improve the health of Gypsy/Travellers in your area.

Why do Gypsy/Travellers have health inequalities?

Income, wealth and power

Unfair differences in income, wealth and power are important drivers of health and health inequalities in Scotland. These can affect access to services that help us live in good health. For example, they can affect how we access quality housing, stable and well-paid work, social and cultural

opportunities, and quality public services. For Gypsy/Traveller communities, access to these is missing in too many cases, meaning they are at greater risk of poorer health and health outcomes.

Use of health services

Previous experiences of discrimination when using health services means that some Gypsy/Travellers will be reluctant to access a service when they really need it. This could mean they miss routine screening appointments, or they do not have access to the right medication or use emergency services when their symptoms are much worse, and their health is poorer.

Limiting people's chances of their right to health limits their ability to live a healthy life. But by fixing the gaps in these services, we can create conditions that improve Gypsy/Travellers' health and wellbeing.

Practical solutions: how you can make a difference

To make progress with reducing the health inequalities experienced by Gypsy/Travellers across Scotland, we need focused action.

In this section, we describe some of the current issues faced by Gypsy/Travellers and give examples of successful solutions that various Health Boards have implemented to address the issue.

issue access to services



A significant number of Gypsy/Travellers are not registered at GPs and dentists because of challenges with registration. This might include not being able to register as a temporary patient, lack of knowledge of how to access and navigate health systems, or services being inaccessible due to distance or inflexibility.

This could mean that some Gypsy/Travellers may miss out on routine screenings, immunisations and regular check-ups.

'I am a Traveller and it is difficult when I move to a new area to get registered with a doctor there. Wherever we are staying it is difficult to get treatment for me and my family.'

Engaging with Gypsy/Travellers around health and wellbeing,
NHS Lanarkshire and Scottish Health Council, 2018.

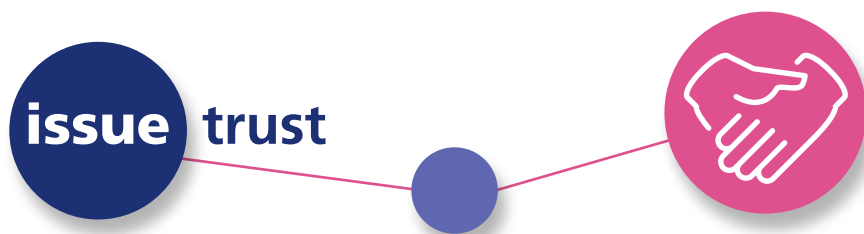
Practical solutions in action: GP registration cards

The **Access to Healthcare: GP registration cards** are designed to support anyone who needs to register at a new GP practice, including Gypsy/Travellers. The cards make it clear that patients do not need proof of identification or a fixed address to register with a GP.

The cards have been shared with Gypsy/Traveller communities across Scotland to use if they have difficulties when registering.

Action

Printable versions of the cards can be downloaded to share with your local Gypsy/Traveller communities. Ensure primary care staff in your area are aware of the cards to help improve access to primary care services.



Owing to longstanding experiences of discrimination and stigma, Gypsy/Travellers may not trust services and it may take time for health services to build trust with members of the community.

Previous personal bad experiences of health services, or bad experiences of relatives or friends, including attitudes of health service staff and lack of cultural understanding, often make Gypsy/Travellers reluctant to access services. In some instances, they avoid services altogether, which could impact negatively on their health.

The most successful interventions to tackle health inequalities in Gypsy/Traveller communities have taken an asset-based approach and relied on outreach and building trusting relationships.

Practical solutions in action: Community Health Matters

Community Health Matters provides direct support to Scottish Gypsy/Travellers living in houses, on sites or at roadsides to improve their health and wellbeing. It employs community health workers from the Gypsy/Traveller community who are trained to provide direct support to their own community.

The service started in December 2021 and is going from strength to strength. It is well respected and trusted by Scottish Gypsy/Travellers.

Examples of how community health workers have supported Gypsy/Travellers include:

- helping people to register with a GP and going to appointments with them
- advocating on behalf of women using maternity services
- increasing awareness about mental health services and support
- completing a 'train the trainers' cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR) course
- passing on the knowledge from their training to their local communities and on local authority sites
- identifying and taking action on cross-cutting issues such as accommodation and education

Community Health Matters is delivered by the MECOPP Community Health Team.

Practical solutions in action: Mums Matter

The pilot project **Mums Matter** aimed to make maternity, health visiting and income maximisation services more easily accessible to Gypsy/Traveller women in Fife. They made the services more flexible and tailored the care to meet the specific needs of the women and children.

The project found that Gypsy/Traveller women do engage with these services, however, they do not disclose they are a Gypsy/Traveller because of a fear of stigma and discrimination. Gypsy/Traveller women would only disclose they are a Gypsy/Traveller if they felt safe and trusted the practitioner.

The Mums Matter project also found that mainstream universal pathways rather than individual pathways were more effective, providing the practitioner works with the women in a culturally sensitive way. It found that a person-centred approach, which took into account a woman's needs and preferences, was more effective than a specific 'Gypsy/Traveller approach'. So, it's important that training and informal learning about Gypsy/Traveller culture and traditions are available to all professionals.



Action

Promote the Turas e-learning module 'Raising awareness of Gypsy/Traveller communities' to all staff but especially those working with Gypsy/Traveller communities.

The module aims to raise awareness of the culture and circumstances of Gypsy/Traveller communities in Scotland. It explores barriers to inclusion and good health, and ways to make services more accessible and responsive to the needs of Gypsy/Travellers.

Practical solutions in action: What matters to you

NHS Lanarkshire's Keep Well Team nurses had established links with the Gypsy/Traveller community in Lanarkshire. They already carried out health checks, monitored blood pressure and diabetes, addressed issues of mental ill health and wellbeing and had built up a rapport with the community. However, they wanted to go beyond the medical needs they were trying to meet and to engage with the community to find out what really mattered to them.

Through the Keep Well Team's trusted, established links with the community and with support from the site manager, the **Community Engagement team** in Healthcare Improvement Scotland (HIS) attended a Keep Well clinic. The team engaged with the local Gypsy/Traveller community and asked the question, '**What matters to you?**'

The outputs from this engagement work informed the development of the national action plan **Improving the lives of Gypsy/Travellers in Scotland: 2019-2021**.

The Community Engagement team in HIS continue to engage with the local Gypsy/Traveller community in Lanarkshire. The team recognised that building relationships over time and understanding the Gypsy/Traveller culture and lifestyle is key to improving health and social care outcomes for this community.

A **webinar about the HIS community engagement work** with the local Gypsy/Traveller community in Lanarkshire is available.



Action

Building a trusted relationship is an important first step before undertaking any work with the Gypsy/Traveller community. You should work with people who have already made connections with the local community, for example local community engagement officers or a third sector organisation like **MECOPP**. You should also seek out people in your Health Board who have previously worked with the community.



Plain English

Many Gypsy/Travellers report that they find information from health professionals difficult to understand.¹ This might be because they find the medical information confusing, or they may have lower literacy levels.

Providing information in a way that people cannot understand means that some Gypsy/Travellers might find it difficult to read medical letters, register with services or understand information given by health professionals. This means they are less likely to engage with services and potentially delay treatment.

‘Tell me how it is! No big words or medical jargon’

Engaging with Gypsy/Travellers around health and wellbeing,
NHS Lanarkshire and Scottish Health Council, 2018

Practical solutions in action: Communication Matters

The online training module Communication Matters trains and supports pharmacists to use evidenced-based health literacy tools and techniques to enable people to understand information about their medication.

The module was promoted to pharmacists working in areas with Gypsy/Traveller communities. To avoid discrimination and stigma, the pharmacists were supported to use the tools and techniques with all patients and not just those from Gypsy/Traveller communities.

The tools and techniques are:

- teach back – a method of checking you have communicated information effectively and that the messages are understood and instructions can be followed
- chunk and check – this requires you to break down information into smaller chunks throughout the discussion and check for understanding along the way and can be used alongside teach back
- use simple language – do not use jargon and abbreviations
- use pictures – simple concepts can be difficult to explain, so you can draw or show a picture or chart to help convey information
- offer help with paperwork – routinely ask people if they would like help filling out forms and understanding any written information given

The module was re-launched in May 2022 and promoted to community pharmacists along with other existing training relevant to Gypsy/Traveller communities.



Action

Promote the use of the online training module Communication Matters. Although aimed at pharmacists, the training module can be accessed by anyone wishing to improve their knowledge about health literacy. The module will support you to be ready and able to explain health information in easy-to-understand language.

You could also look at the **Health Literacy Place website** for further information and techniques to meet people's communication needs.

Practical solutions in action: information in the right place

In the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic the 'Gypsy/Travellers Scotland: Public Information Service' Facebook page was set up.

The aim of the page was to serve as a go-to place for Gypsy/Travellers to access trusted, reliable public health information relating to COVID-19. This included information about the vaccine, how to stay safe during the pandemic and how to access health services.

The page is managed and monitored by Article 12 who worked with young Gypsy/Travellers to design and produce information videos and infographics for the page. During the first year of the pandemic the page had a reach of over 160,000.

The page continues to be a source of information for Gypsy/Travellers and the content has been widened to include any health-related messaging. This includes information about the flu vaccine, mental health initiatives and first aid videos. Contact **Article 12** for further information.

Not being heard

Gypsy/Travellers have also reported experiences of feeling like they are not being listened to, not being taken seriously or staff not taking the time to explain diagnoses and treatments in a way they understand.²

Practical solutions in action: raising awareness of screening services

NHS Highland was aware their local Gypsy/Traveller communities might be missing out on important routine screening appointments for several reasons. For example, fear of diagnosis of a terminal condition due to cultural taboos, lack of information and knowledge about screening services and difficulties with follow-up and receiving results.

Working with MECOPP, the project team developed a training session for local Gypsy/Traveller women on breast and cervical screening. The aim of the training was to increase participants' knowledge and confidence about screening to enable them to pass on the information to the community and encourage and support participation in screening.

It was felt that training Gypsy/Traveller women would be the best way of getting information to the wider community.

Advice and guidance from MECOPP and other Gypsy/Traveller third sector organisations allowed the project team to develop a culturally specific and accessible training session and materials.

All participants fed back they enjoyed the session and had learned a lot. They liked having the opportunity to discuss what the Gypsy/Traveller community considers a taboo subject and to do so in a safe setting. They all said they would share the information with other women in their families, follow-up on screening appointments for themselves and that they would be interested in future sessions.

Practical solutions in action: forming an agreement

The **Our Health, Our Rights, Our NHS Gypsy/Traveller and NHS Scotland** agreement aims to improve and build trusting relationships between Gypsy/Traveller communities and the NHS in Scotland.

Produced in partnership, and based on the Patient Rights Charter, the agreement outlines the rights and responsibilities of both NHS staff and Gypsy/Travellers when using health services. This includes having a named senior person in each Health Board to listen to good and bad healthcare experiences.



Action

Ask the named person in your Health Board if they have received any feedback from Gypsy/Travellers and what was done because of this.

issue digital exclusion



Many Gypsy/Travellers experience digital exclusion. This can be for several reasons such as not accessing the internet regularly, not having a home internet connection or not having the confidence or skills to use digital technology.³ Some Gypsy/Travellers also report not being able to afford to frequently access information online due to limited data.³

With use of digital technologies in the health service increasing,⁴ it is possible that it could widen inequalities for some Gypsy/Travellers. For example, having to make or check-in for an appointment online can leave some Gypsy/Travellers feeling embarrassed and unsure of how to do it.² These feelings might make them reluctant to use the service which could impact their health and wellbeing.

As health and care services increasingly turn to and rely on digital solutions, it's important to remember that this could potentially add a further barrier to someone trying to access the service.

Practical solution: impact assessments

One way to mitigate against digital exclusion is to undertake an impact assessment on any new policy and service design. This will help mitigate possible negative impacts on different groups.

The impact assessment guide 'Improving access for Gypsy/Travellers to NHS and health and social care in Scotland, developed by the NHS and Health and Social Care Partnerships Scottish Gypsy/Traveller Forum, will support your thinking when carrying out an impact assessment.

References

1. Friends, Families & Travellers, **Experiences of Gypsies and Travellers in primary care: GP service**; 2019.
2. McFadden A, Siebelt L, Gavine A, Atkin K, Bell K, Innes N et al. **Gypsy, Roma and Traveller access to and engagement with health services: a systematic review**; Dundee: University of Dundee; 2018.
3. Friends, Families & Travellers. **Digital exclusion in Gypsy and Traveller communities in the United Kingdom**; 2018.
4. Scottish Government, **Digital health and care strategy**. Edinburgh: Scottish Government; 2021.