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# ***Working with older Gypsies and Travellers***

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A briefing for local Age UKs/Age Concerns



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# Introduction

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**The purpose of this briefing is to provide information and guidance for local Age UK/ Age Concern service managers and Information and Advice managers on the circumstances and issues for older people from Gypsy and Traveller communities.**

These communities are a particularly excluded group in our society, facing widespread discrimination and prejudice and a complex set of exclusionary barriers which affect their ability to access education, employment, training, accommodation and health and social care services. Older Gypsies and Travellers experience all of these issues but, combined with the particular difficulties experienced as a result of age, their circumstances are even more challenging.

## Key issues for older Gypsies and Travellers

- Gypsies and Travellers experience worse health than the rest of the population. They are less likely to receive effective, continuous healthcare and more likely to die earlier.
- There are high suicide rates among the communities.
- Employment rates are low and poverty high. This impacts upon the income that older Gypsies and Travellers can count upon.
- Many older Gypsies and Travellers may have had little, if any, formal education.
- Accommodation is a crucial issue for older Gypsies and Travellers, and difficulties in this area have a great impact upon health and well-being.
- Policy initiatives and political systems that are designed to promote inclusion and equality frequently exclude Gypsy and Traveller communities.
- There is a lack of access to culturally appropriate support services for people in the most vulnerable situations, including older people.
- Gypsies' and Travellers' culture and identity receive little or no recognition, with consequent and considerable damage to their self-esteem.

These issues often interact to create a significant negative impact on the quality of life and well-being enjoyed by older Gypsies and Travellers.

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# General information about Gypsy and Traveller communities

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## Who are Gypsies and Travellers?

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The terms 'Gypsy' and 'Traveller' are often misleadingly used interchangeably to cover Romany Gypsies, Irish Travellers, Scottish and Welsh Travellers, New Travellers, Showmen and Circus People and Roma from Eastern and Central Europe. Under the Race Relations Act 1976, Romany Gypsies, Scots Gypsy Travellers and Irish Travellers are recognised as ethnic minority groups. This briefing focuses on the needs of Romany Gypsies (referred to as 'Gypsies' for the rest of this briefing) and Irish Travellers (referred to hereafter as 'Travellers') but we would encourage local Age UKs/Age Concerns to seek out information on other travelling communities in their area.

Gypsies are believed to have migrated from India in about AD1000, first reaching Britain five centuries later. The first authenticated record of their presence in Britain is in Scotland in 1505. The first authenticated record in England is in 1514, confirming that Gypsies have been in England for around 500 years.

Irish Travellers were first recorded in Ireland in the fifth century as a nomadic group with a distinct identity, dialect and social organisation. They have been living in Britain since the beginning of the 19th century.

While the two groups differ in family size, economic activity, travelling patterns, religion, language<sup>1</sup> and certain cultural traditions, they also have much in common – most significantly a nomadic tradition.

## How many Gypsies and Travellers are there?

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The simple answer is 'we don't know'. There is currently very little ethnic monitoring being carried out in general, and where ethnicity data is collected Gypsies and Travellers are generally not included as a specific ethnic category. For example, Gypsies or Travellers have not been recognised as an ethnic group in censuses up until now, so no baseline data is at present available on a national level. However, there is some indicative information:

- In 2006 a Commission for Racial Equality report identified that Gypsies and Irish Travellers were resident in or passed through 91 per cent of local authority areas. Of those authorities that knew the numbers living in or passing through their area, 13 per cent described Gypsies and Irish Travellers as the largest ethnic minority group in the area (Commission for Racial Equality, 2006).
- Estimates of the community's population range from 300,000 in 2000 (Morris and Clements, 2002) to between 120,000 and 300,000 (Bowers, undated).

Things will be different from 2011 when the census will include 'Gypsy or Irish Traveller' as an ethnic group under the 'White' heading. Therefore, information will be available in future to help identify where these communities are.

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<sup>1</sup> Romani has its roots in the old Indian language of Sanskrit, while the Irish Traveller language, known as Cant or Gammon, has a completely different root and is not related in any way.

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# Issues for older Gypsies and Travellers

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Within Gypsy and Traveller communities, older people are respected. They play an active part in the upbringing of children and their knowledge of both work and traditions is valued and passed on to younger members of the community. However, a number of key issues impact on the quality of life experienced by older Gypsies and Travellers. These include issues concerning health, accommodation, education, employment and income.

## Health

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**‘Gypsy Travellers have significantly poorer health status and significantly more self-reported symptoms of ill health than other UK-resident, English-speaking ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged white UK residents.’** (Parry et al., 2004)

This research found that self-reported chest pain, respiratory problems and arthritis were more prevalent in the Traveller group than the comparable population.

In 2009 the Equality and Human Rights Commission reported high rates of anxiety, depression and at times self-destructive behaviour (for example, suicide and/or substance abuse) in the travelling communities (Cemlyn et al., 2009).

Other research (Barry et al., 1987) found that:

- traveller women live on average 12 years less than women in the general population
- traveller men live on average ten years less than men in the general population.

Reasons identified for the comparatively low use of mainstream health services include:

- complex procedures for registering and accessing services
- the isolation of sites, which can create problems in accessing dentists and opticians
- difficulty in accessing primary care through GPs because of their insistence on having a permanent address
- some GPs only registering families as temporary residents, resulting in exclusion from a range of services, such as screening
- other GPs reportedly refusing to register Gypsies and Travellers at all
- lack of advocacy support for Gypsies and Travellers who have difficulties in accessing health services
- fear among Gypsy and Traveller communities that services will not respect their cultural concerns
- fear of particular health concerns, such as cancer, lead community members to avoid seeking preventive care or screening.

However, there are now indications that where Gypsies and Travellers have access to secure local authority or private sites and are able to access adequate medical care, life expectancy may be more closely aligned to that of the sedentary community.

## Accommodation

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**‘Social conditions and poor health are directly related. Lack of sites with adequate facilities and poor housing conditions take their toll on the health of the middle and older generations.’**

(Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group, 2009a)

Accommodation is a key issue for Gypsy and Traveller communities. Being able to choose their own style of accommodation and to decide for themselves whether, or how, they continue to live a traditional travelling lifestyle is critical to the feelings of the independence and autonomy experienced by older Gypsies and Travellers.

There are complex issues around accommodation policies and planning permission which make it difficult for older people to settle on authorised sites with other family members or with carers.

For example:

- Since the implementation of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act in 1994, planning policy has moved from the provision of publicly owned local authority sites, to (on paper at least) self-provision by the communities themselves. The need to apply for planning permission to develop a site on land which they have purchased privately often leads to disputes, and opposition from local residents frequently leads to local authorities turning down planning applications. There are currently proposals to change the planning laws again which, if introduced by the new coalition Government, will make the situation even more difficult for Gypsies and Travellers.

- The Gypsy and Traveller Accommodation Assessments (GTAAs), which all local authorities were obliged to carry out, have revealed a considerable shortfall nationally in site provision. As a result of this, one in four Gypsies and Travellers living in caravans do not have a legal place on which to park their home, and they are thus, in law, homeless. This situation will not be improved by the proposed cuts to the Government’s Gypsy and Traveller programme.
- They may face lengthy waits to obtain adaptations to caravans on authorised public sites. As a result, they may be confined to their homes as no ramps or other adaptations have been fitted by local authorities.
- Accommodation policies may preclude older people having a carer to live with them on site through lack of space, or regulations on numbers of caravans at a location, forcing them to live alone, in contrast to their social and cultural expectations.

## Bricks and mortar

Many Gypsies and Travellers live in permanent housing. A figure of more than half is often quoted, although there is a lack of accurate data. This particularly applies to those in later life and those with young children, where travelling may be a problem as a result of health issues or the need to access schools. It would not be the preference of the majority and has implications for people's sense of well-being.

**'For Gypsy Travellers, living in a house is associated with long-term illness, poorer health state and anxiety. Those who rarely travel have the poorest health.'** (Parry et al., 2004)

Living in bricks and mortar creates particular issues:

- The transition from living in a caravan on a site or, especially, on the roadside can be very stressful when people are unused to dealing with tenancies, claiming benefits, or with budgeting to pay household bills. If eviction and homelessness are to be avoided, advocacy and support services are needed (Cemlyn et al., 2009).
- The transition can sometimes be made harder by discrimination and harassment from neighbours. There may be genuine lifestyle differences to cause friction, but stereotyping, ignorance and fear are also relevant.
- Anecdotal evidence suggests that Gypsies and Travellers may sometimes move quite rapidly between houses or leave accommodation to return to a site. Moving into a house may be a life-cycle event, perhaps when particular health needs persist. Thus, a move to a house is not necessarily one way and final.

## Education, employment and income

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**'Traditional Travellers, both Romany and Irish, are reserved toward education since school had been seen as a means to assimilate Gypsy Travellers into the majority. The attitude toward education has changed during the last few years to a positive direction regarding the fact that the majority would like to see the children go through primary school.'**

(Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group, 2009a)

As a result of the reservations about education, many older Gypsies and Travellers may have had little, if any, formal education, Literacy levels can, therefore, be comparatively low. This can have a major negative impact on the ease with which they are able to identify and access the services and benefits which would be appropriate for them and which they are entitled to.

Lack of education and the travelling life also limits the employment opportunities for Gypsies and Travellers. Most work is manual, self-employed and on a casual basis. This has a knock-on effect on national insurance payments and, consequently, on entitlement to a full state pension. This can be further complicated by the lack of official documentation, such as birth certificates, making it difficult to gain access to anything other than basic state benefits. Given the low percentage of Gypsies and Travellers aged 50 and over who are in paid employment, access to disability or unemployment benefits is critical. As the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) points out:

**‘The poverty experienced by older Gypsies and Travellers may be profound: without assistance, illiterate community members or those who are unaware of their legal rights may find it extremely hard to access benefits or to claim all that they are entitled to ... However, support may not always be forthcoming for socially isolated older Gypsies and Travellers or if other relatives are equally unfamiliar with the benefits system.’** (Cemlyn et al., 2009)

## **Cultural issues**

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Like other groups Gypsies and Travellers wish to see their cultures recognised and respected. Customs are a personal thing and they may not be followed in the same way by all families all the time. However, lack of cultural awareness, sensitivity and appropriate outreach methods by those working with Gypsy and Traveller communities will result in misunderstandings and older people not receiving the services they need and to which they are entitled.

Key areas for workers to be aware of are:

### **The importance of family**

Where older Gypsies and Travellers live with, or close to, family members they will receive the support and care which is likely to protect them against social exclusion and extreme poverty. However, this does not necessarily guarantee knowledge of, or access to, the benefits and services to which they may be entitled so they may still need support from external agencies.

Where older Gypsies and Travellers have accommodation in isolation, the situation is likely to be far more bleak. Low literacy levels, combined with lack of awareness of support that may actually be available, makes it much harder for them to find solutions.

### **Customs of cleanliness (Mochadi)**

Gypsies and Travellers have many customs relating to cleanliness. These are partly a result of the practical issues created by living in a small space but they also have cultural and ceremonial connotations.

There are many of these but some examples are:

- food dishes and cutlery are never placed where anyone would sit, stand or walk
- cloths and kitchen towels are never used for any other purpose, e.g. to wipe down furniture
- dishcloths, kitchen towels and tablecloths are washed separately from other things
- food bags are never put on the floor and things that can be put on the floor, such as toys or handbags, are never put on the table.

### **Customs of chastity**

Many Gypsies and Travellers have traditional values, particularly in relation to sexual issues. This is one of the reasons why many do not send their children to secondary school – they do not want them to be exposed to sex education. This approach also applies to older Gypsies and Travellers. For example, any subject concerning women’s health is not discussed in the presence of men. Similarly, there will be a good deal of shyness and reservation about undressing in front of strangers. Privacy in dressing and undressing is very important.

To find out more about Gypsy and Traveller culture, see the Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group’s publication, *An Improved Path to a Better Road: An Information Booklet for Health Care & Other Professionals*.

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# Issues for local Age UKs/Age Concerns

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Older Gypsies and Travellers are present in the vast majority of areas of England. Just because they are not using your services does not mean that they are not there.

In order to reach out to this community of people in later life, local Age UKs/Age Concerns can give some thought to the following areas.

## **How can we find out about older Gypsies and Travellers in our area?**

- Investigate whether there are any local specialist groups in your area that will be able to help you find out more and, hopefully, to make contact.
- Is the local authority working with the community? Does it have a dedicated worker or is it in contact via programmes such as Supporting People? Does it have a local liaison committee (such as the one in Norfolk)?

## **How will we know whether any older Gypsies and Travellers are using our services?**

- Do your monitoring processes collect this information when you gather details about the ethnicity of service users? If not, you can insert 'Gypsy or Irish Traveller' (as per the 2011 census) into the categories you use. If you have other travelling people (such as Showmen) in your area, you may wish to collect information on them too.

## **How can we make contact with older Gypsies and Travellers locally?**

- Many older Gypsies and Travellers may be reluctant to approach non-Gypsy Traveller organisations for advice or assistance. This may be as a result of embarrassment, the fact that they do not know that you can help them or because they have previously had negative experiences of working with external organisations. As a result, it may take time to build up trust and credibility. Again, contact with local specialist organisations or dedicated workers can be the gatekeepers, who can ease the way for you. It is far better to use them to introduce you, than just turning up on a site which can cause offence.
- Find out from community organisations about any social events, such as horse fairs and events organised for Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month (June). Try to go along to events organised in your area to disseminate information and to get yourself known.

## **How can we make ourselves more approachable to older Gypsies and Travellers and our services more appropriate for them?**

- Ensure that cultural awareness training for staff covers Gypsies and Travellers so that staff gain a better understanding of their culture. Remember that many elders from Gypsy and Traveller communities cannot read or write, so this needs to be taken into account when producing resources or information which is intended for older people.

## **One approach to working with older Gypsies and Travellers**

In December 2008, Age Concern Norfolk (now Age UK Norfolk) appointed a development worker (DW) to a post funded by the Norfolk Local Involvement Network. The role of this worker was to engage with older people from black and minority ethnic (BME) and other marginalised groups.

One of the early areas that the DW focused on was building contact with Gypsy and Traveller people on the permanent sites in Norfolk.

An early meeting was held with the Chair of the Gypsy and Irish Traveller Council. She told the DW of some of the cultural issues that he needed to be aware of when speaking with people from the community.

The DW spent time networking and meeting others who had contacts in the community and could help by introducing him to them. The key message that he took was that Age Concern Norfolk would help them to provide support to their older people. The role revolved around telling people what Age Concern Norfolk offered and building trust.

Age Concern Norfolk then received a request from another local organisation, asking them to help a woman on an unauthorised site to apply for Attendance Allowance. A Benefits Adviser from Age Concern Norfolk subsequently visited this person with a staff member from the other organisation and helped complete the forms. The application was successful.

The DW has established links with the different sites in Norfolk (and one in north-west Suffolk) and has provided information on the different services that Age Concern Norfolk provides. They are now exploring how they can provide information about what they do in formats that

are appropriate for the community, including using postcards with culturally appropriate pictures on one side.

The DW also attends meetings of the Norfolk Gypsy/Traveller Liaison group. Recently, the person who has an overview of the managers of sites in Norfolk, and is a Traveller herself, commented positively on the service provided by Age Concern Norfolk, saying she 'didn't realise just how much advice was available'.

Age Concern Norfolk has identified the following learning points:

- To learn something of the culture before trying to engage.
- To offer to support the community to look after its own older people and not to say that the Age Concern can do it.
- To acknowledge that it will take a long time to build trust, which must be earned.
- To ensure that services are receptive to the needs of people from the community.
- To work with other partners that can introduce them to individuals in the community.
- To look at ways in which information can be produced which is accessible, useful and culturally acceptable to the community.

### **For further information, please contact:**

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# **Specialist organisations and sources of support**

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This list is not intended to be all-encompassing but lists some of the groups that may be useful. We would encourage local Age UKs/ Age Concerns to investigate which groups are operating in their specific area.

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## **National groups**

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### **Church Network for Gypsies and Travellers**

[www.cngt.org.uk/key\\_issues.htm](http://www.cngt.org.uk/key_issues.htm)

### **Friends, Families and Travellers**

[www.gypsy-traveller.org](http://www.gypsy-traveller.org)

### **The Gypsy Council**

European and UK Office

8 Hall Road

Aveley

Essex RM15 4HD

[www.grtleeds.co.uk/information/GypsyCouncil](http://www.grtleeds.co.uk/information/GypsyCouncil)

### **Irish Travellers Movement in Britain**

[www.irishtraveller.org.uk](http://www.irishtraveller.org.uk)

### **National Federation of Gypsy Liaison Groups**

[www.nationalgypsytravellerfederation.org](http://www.nationalgypsytravellerfederation.org)

### **The Showmen's Guild of Great Britain**

[www.showmensguild.com](http://www.showmensguild.com)

### **UK Association of Gypsy Women**

[www.travellersinleeds.co.uk](http://www.travellersinleeds.co.uk)

South Office: 01268 782 792

North Office: 01325 240 033

Mobile: 07748 670 200

## **Local groups**

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### **Canterbury Gypsy and Traveller Support Group**

01227 289 260

### **Cheshire Gypsy & Travellers Voice**

[www.travellersvoice.org](http://www.travellersvoice.org)

### **The Clearwater Gypsies** (West Sussex)

[www.clearwatergypsies.com](http://www.clearwatergypsies.com)

### **Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group**

[www.dglg.org](http://www.dglg.org)

### **East Anglia Gypsy Council**

Plot 3, Travellers Site

Oxney Road, Peterborough

Cambridgeshire

### **Gypsy Roma Traveller Achievement Service**

[www.GypsyRomaTravellerLeeds.co.uk](http://www.GypsyRomaTravellerLeeds.co.uk)

### **Hull Gypsy and Traveller Exchange**

01482 441 002 extension 205

### **Irish Community Care Manchester**

0161 205 9105 / 0161 256 2717

### **Irish Community Care Merseyside**

0151 237 3987

### **Leeds Gypsy and Traveller Exchange**

[www.grtleeds.co.uk/information/GATE.html](http://www.grtleeds.co.uk/information/GATE.html)

01132 402 444 or 07974 574 889

### **Lincolnshire Gypsy Liaison Group**

[www.lglg.co.uk](http://www.lglg.co.uk)

01427 619 521

### **Romany Gypsy Advisory Group** (South West)

07768 858 802

### **Somerset Gypsy Liaison Group:**

01458 210 899

### **SPARC – Society for the Promotion and Advancement of Romany Culture** (North East)

01642 243 453

### **Surrey Traveller Community Relations Forum**

07968 545 481 or 0796 883 4243

### **Walsall Gypsy and Traveller Forum**

01922 443 440

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## **Further information**

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**A number of useful downloads can be obtained (free of charge) from the following sites:**

### **Race Equality Foundation**

*Housing Briefing Paper 10 – Gypsies, Travellers and Accommodation:*  
[www.better-housing.org.uk/briefing-paper.asp?id=10](http://www.better-housing.org.uk/briefing-paper.asp?id=10)

*Better Health Briefing 12 – The Health of Gypsies and Travellers in the UK:*  
[www.better-health.org.uk/briefing-paper.asp?id=12](http://www.better-health.org.uk/briefing-paper.asp?id=12)

### **Equality and Human Rights Commission**

*Research Report 12 – Inequalities Experienced by Gypsy and Traveller Communities:*  
[www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded\\_files/research/12inequalities\\_experienced\\_by\\_gypsy\\_and\\_traveller\\_communities\\_a\\_review.pdf](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/research/12inequalities_experienced_by_gypsy_and_traveller_communities_a_review.pdf)

*Research Report 13 – Assessing Local Housing Authorities' Progress in Meeting the Accommodation Needs of Gypsy and Traveller Communities in England:*  
[www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded\\_files/13assessing\\_local\\_housing\\_authorities\\_progress.pdf](http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/uploaded_files/13assessing_local_housing_authorities_progress.pdf)

### **Travellers Times**

*Travellers Times Online FAQ Pack – Gypsies and Travellers: Their Lifestyle, History and Culture:* [www.travellerstimes.org.uk/downloads/TravellersTimesOnlineFAQPack\\_09022009122802.pdf](http://www.travellerstimes.org.uk/downloads/TravellersTimesOnlineFAQPack_09022009122802.pdf)

**With regard specifically to health, useful information can be downloaded from the following:**

### **Pacesetters Programme**

[www.dh.gov.uk/en/Managingyourorganisation/Workforce/Equalityanddiversity/Pacesetters/index.htm](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Managingyourorganisation/Workforce/Equalityanddiversity/Pacesetters/index.htm)

**See especially the Bristol PCT and South Gloucestershire PCT Case Study Working with the Gypsy and Traveller Community**  
[www.dh.gov.uk/prod\\_consum\\_dh/groups/dh\\_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh\\_091720.pdf](http://www.dh.gov.uk/prod_consum_dh/groups/dh_digitalassets/@dh/@en/documents/digitalasset/dh_091720.pdf)

### **Race for Health**

[www.raceforhealth.org](http://www.raceforhealth.org)

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***In the majority of literature and research relating to Gypsies and Travellers, the voices of older people are not heard, and they become an invisible population within a marginalised community.***

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*At What Cost? The Economics of Gypsy and Traveller Encampments*, The Policy Press, Bristol.

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**Race Equality West Midlands** (2005)

*Gypsies and Travellers: Disadvantage and Discrimination – How Race Equality Councils and Other Voluntary Bodies Can Help*.

## Other useful reports

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*I Know When It's Raining – Report of the Community-led Research Project Focussing on the Emotional Health and Well-Being Needs of Romany Gypsies and Irish Travellers*, Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group, Matlock.

**Leicestershire Centre for Integrated Living and Derbyshire Gypsy Liaison Group** (2010)

*The Wheels of Change – A Report on the Barriers Faced by Disabled Gypsies and Travellers When Accessing the Social Care System*.

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***Older Gypsies and Travellers are present in the vast majority of areas of England. Just because they are not using your services does not mean they are not there.***

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# Our ambition

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## We want to see the transformation of later life in the UK and globally. Our ambition is for:

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- a world where we celebrate ageing and treat people of all ages fairly, with dignity and respect
- financial security for us all and an end to poverty in later life
- better health for longer and improved care when we need it
- excellent support to stay independent when we are frail or caring for loved ones
- the ability to work for as long as we want, with no forced retirement
- products and services designed to meet our needs
- communities where every one of us is able to have fun, take part and have a voice
- recognition of our diversity and support for the most vulnerable.

## To meet this ambition Age UK will be a powerful voice campaigning for change. But we will not just challenge others, we will act. With our partners we will:

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- deliver trusted information and advice to more than 5 million people each year
- enable millions more people to benefit from new technologies
- provide practical services to help people stay independent at home
- create local opportunities for people to enjoy life, stay well and beat isolation
- address market failures with age-friendly services, products and business partnerships
- commission biomedical, social and lifestyle research to tackle ill-health and boost quality of life
- work globally to help over a million people in developing countries.



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