



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Tuesday 22 March 2022

Session 6



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EQUALITIES, HUMAN RIGHTS AND CIVIL JUSTICE COMMITTEE
9th Meeting 2022, Session 6

CONVENER

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DEPUTY CONVENER

*Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP)

*Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab)

*Pam Gosal (West Scotland) (Con)

*Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP)

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Davie Donaldson (Progress in Dialogue)

Leslie Drury (Article 12 in Scotland)

Dr Maureen Finn (STEP)

Suzanne Munday (Minority Ethnic Carers of People Project)

Dr Lynne Tammi (AyeRight)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Katrina Venters

LOCATION

Virtual Meeting

Scottish Parliament

Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee

Tuesday 22 March 2022

[The Convener opened the meeting at 10:00]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Joe FitzPatrick): Good morning and welcome to the ninth meeting in 2022 of the Equalities, Human Rights and Civil Justice Committee. Under agenda item 1, does the committee agree to take item 3, which is consideration of the evidence that we will hear today, in private?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Thank you.

Gypsy Travellers in Scotland

10:00

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is an evidence session on the lives of Gypsy Travellers in Scotland. I refer members to papers 1 and 2. I welcome our witnesses to the meeting. Suzanne Munday is Gypsy/Traveller programme manager at the Minority Ethnic Carers of People Project, Dr Lynne Tammi is from AyeRight, Dr Maureen Finn is from the Scottish Traveller Education Programme, Leslie Drury is national co-ordinator at Article 12 in Scotland, and Davie Donaldson is from Progress in Dialogue.

Thank you all for attending to give evidence today. You are all very welcome. When you wish to answer a question, please indicate that by typing the letter R in the chat box. I will do my best to bring you in, and my clerks will keep an eye on that to make sure that we are not missing anybody.

To start off, I ask each of our witnesses to make a short opening statement, starting with Suzanne Munday.

Suzanne Munday (Minority Ethnic Carers of People Project): Good morning, everybody. Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence to the committee this morning. We welcome the opportunity to give evidence on progress against the implementation of the Scottish national action plan, "Improving the Lives of Scotland's Gypsy/Travellers 2019-2021", and the five key themes within it.

Although the pandemic is not the principal focus of this evidence session, our experience has been that progress against the action plan has been and continues to be inextricably linked with the impact of Covid-19. For the past two years, much of our effort and that of our partners has been focused on supporting the community through the pandemic. That has been done on top of our day jobs, in which we have done our best to maintain core services. That has meant that progress against the priorities in the action plan has been either delayed or stalled.

There have been notable achievements, such as the £20 million accommodation fund as part of the commitments in the "Housing to 2040" strategy, but there has been a sense of frustration about the slow roll-out of the money and about local authority decisions either not to apply or to delay applying. The decision to extend the action plan is, I think, recognition of how much still needs to be done.

However, the action plan as it stands cannot be a static document. It must take into account and

reflect new and emerging priorities such as the impacts of rising fuel costs and the overall cost of living on a community that is already disadvantaged economically and financially. An advice and resilience service that we set up as part of our immediate response to support the community through the pandemic made over 90 successful applications for welfare benefits, hardship funds, charitable grants, referrals to food banks and emergency fuel top-ups. We are extremely concerned that the cost of living increase will continue to impact disproportionately on the community.

In closing, I note that we are contributing today very much from an organisational point of view. We urge the committee to undertake further engagement work directly with the community to hear their views at first hand.

Dr Lynne Tammi (AyeRight): I will not repeat what Suzanne Munday has said in very finely putting over to the committee what are probably the thoughts of most of us. However, I will add that a major issue for me is the drawing down at local government level of funding that is available for new-build sites or for the upgrading of existing sites. That is too slow. In addition, when it comes to how that is dealt with by the people who work at grass-roots level, I wonder how it is monitored and evaluated across Scotland and whether comparisons are to be had.

Another issue that is continuing for us, to which Covid is also connected, concerns digital inequalities. Although a lot of work has been done since Covid first came to our shores to get data and devices out to Gypsy Traveller children and young people, my concern is about what follows on from that. Data was being provided, but that is not continuing. In addition, there is the question of how young people are supported to continue with their learning—in particular, with learning that takes cognisance of the nomadic underpinnings of the community. I would like people to turn things on their head and, instead of saying that young people and families interrupt their learning because of their nomadic practices, make provision, particularly online, so that young people can continue with learning that fits with their cultural practices.

Dr Maureen Finn (STEP): Good morning to the committee, and thank you for having me as well. STEP is the centre for traveller education. The purpose of our work is to ensure that nomadic communities such as Gypsy Travellers have equitable access to education and that children's rights to education are respected. We work closely with TENET—the Traveller Education Network—which is a body of local authority staff. Recently, as part of the action plan, we have developed with 80 teachers, who are local authority staff, a

network to deliver digital learning throughout Scotland.

I echo what Suzanne Munday has said, in that a lot of our work on the action plan has not only been stalled but has shifted. We have had to be reactive and to change our normal ways of working to make sure that we deliver some kind of service for families throughout the pandemic.

As Lynne Tammi has touched on, the list of barriers to education that are experienced by families has, for many years, been huge. It ranges from racism to practical things such as transport and family concerns about the perceived irrelevance to Traveller lives of much of the school curriculum. It is a fact that, for many years, on all education indicators, Gypsy Traveller children have continually fared worse than any other group—and the stats show only half the picture, because many children do not ever go to school.

Recently, we carried out research with 16 local authority staff and 10 families, which revealed the devastating impact of the pandemic and mirrors what Lynne Tammi and Suzanne Munday have just said. More than two thirds said that there has been a significant decrease in engagement in education and, worryingly, that many of the families are young families with primary school children who have not returned to primary school. The implications of that for the future are worrying.

Although we distributed more than 100 digital kits as part of the national initiative during the pandemic, staff reported only a slight increase in the use of technology for education. Again, that echoes what Lynne Tammi said. The emphasis is on the digital divide in that, at home, Traveller families are not able to support their children with technology. Technology was used for many other useful things but not for education in the main.

Most worrying is our recent consultation with 10 new families. Few knew about the availability of help and resources in education, and they talked about the lack of continuity from one local authority area to another. That has been an on-going concern of mine. We need to have consistency.

The problem is forecast to grow, because local authority staff are also reporting that they are increasingly stretched. Following the pandemic, many Gypsy Traveller families need additional support for learning services. It is a bit of a lottery.

To finish off on a positive note, parents and teachers reported that they saw immense potential for positive benefits for the future from the use of digital technology and that it complemented the Gypsy Traveller way of life, if they were supported enough to use it effectively for education.

Leslie Drury (Article 12 in Scotland): Good morning, and thank you for having me. I work with young Gypsy Travellers providing educational support, capacity building and pathways to work. One of my key aims this morning is to share some of the views that we have learned from our young people regarding their concerns and the issues that they are having. I agree with what all the previous witnesses have said. That is absolutely what we are hearing from our young people.

In particular, there are concerns about the continuity of services between local authorities, whether those are educational or mental health services. We would like to see a stronger plan for supporting families, no matter what their housing situation is, whether they are living roadside and shifting between local authorities or living in a settled site.

Additionally, we want to see a lot more focus on digital issues and digital access for young people, as Dr Tammi mentioned, because we think that that is a way forward for many young people in order to have continuity of service.

Davie Donaldson (Progress in Dialogue): I first gave evidence to the committee about five years ago, when I think that I described the situation for Gypsy Travellers in Scotland as having stagnated for decades. Sitting here today, I am very thankful that some progress has been made, particularly in starting a conversation on inequalities that Gypsy Traveller communities face in Scotland. We have also seen some movement in terms of accommodation, which has already been articulated by other witnesses. However, there is still a need to recognise that inequalities and issues persist for our communities in Scotland, and I hope to raise some of those.

Some of the key points include the unsustainable funding models that we continue to see rolled out by central Government for very important projects. Those projects do fantastic work, but they are not given enough funding to be sustainable and to continue year after year. We saw that, for example, with a great project that I was involved in with Article 12, which was the Gypsy Traveller youth assembly. We brought together some fantastic young people and empowered them to use their voices and tell their stories, but the funding did not continue. I am sad that that funding model is continuing for much of the work of the third sector.

We have also seen a rise in gesture politics. I do not raise that to put a dampener on the great co-production that has happened—the cross-party work and, in particular, the work between the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities and the Government. However, we have seen a rise in people making statements that are seen more as gesture than action, particularly at central

Government level. Those do not translate down to the grass roots. There have been many occasions when activists like me have gone to events and heard some fantastic rhetoric but that has not then translated into action and the Gypsy Traveller communities living at the grass roots have not seen anything come to fruition from that rhetoric either.

The other point that I hoped to raise was that we saw some fantastic co-ordination of services such as toilets, water and sanitation during the Covid lockdown. However, that is no longer the case and families roadside are continuing to struggle to access basic needs. We are also not seeing adequate provisions or protections put in place for ancestral stopping sites. I raised that in 2017 as a point of significance to me and my family and we still see that, in spite of cross-party support for a motion in 2018 to protect ancestral stopping places.

Another point that I want to touch on, which I will touch on only because it was raised by another witness, is the cost of living crisis and our movement towards being a cashless society. I am growing increasingly concerned about that, particularly for employability in Gypsy Traveller communities. They tend to follow trades and oral teaching—very few Gypsy Travellers go on to do things such as apprenticeships, which we know is an inequality and an issue. However, if we are moving towards being a cashless society, particularly after the pandemic, we need to think about how that will impact communities where people traditionally work on cash and do not have a permanent address.

Lastly, a point that I want to raise, which has been raised by many activists for decades, is the fact that there has still been no Government apology for the cultural trauma, and what has been termed the cultural genocide, of Gypsy Travellers throughout the 20th century, and the forced removal and forced sedentarisation of families throughout Scotland. An apology has been called for by activists such as Roseanna McPhee and Shamus McPhee, among others. I hope that 2022, the year of Scotland's stories, will be the year that the Government will strongly consider making an apology, recognising the impact of cultural trauma on today's inequalities and telling Scotland's Gypsy Travellers' story in full.

I am delighted to be here.

10:15

The Convener: Before we move to questions, a number of the panel mentioned grass-roots engagement. I put on record that, as part of the committee's on-going work programme, we are

determined to go out and engage directly with the community when that is appropriate. That is certainly in our plans for the future. We will now move to questions and I hand over to Maggie Chapman.

Maggie Chapman (North East Scotland) (Green): Good morning to our witnesses and thank you for giving up your time to join the committee. Thank you for your opening remarks. There is a lot of challenge in what you have already said and there are many areas for the committee and, as Davie Donaldson said in his final comments, for the Government and the country more generally to work on.

Many of the witnesses have talked about the work that local authorities do and the services that they provide, whether that is individually or through COSLA. The action plan mentions the need for close partnership working. There are different levels of responsibility between local government and the Scottish Government, but third sector organisations also play a crucial role.

What are we getting right with partnership working and, more importantly, what are we getting wrong, and what do we need to fix? I will ask each of you in turn. A couple of you have already talked about monitoring and evaluation needing to be comparable across the country, for example. I am interested in specific examples, if you have them and are prepared to talk about them. I will go to Suzanne Munday first.

Suzanne Munday: To talk about what could be done better, it would be helpful if each local authority and/or health board were required to develop a strategic plan setting out how it is going to meet the requirements of the national action plan. At the moment, the development of such groups across Scotland is incredibly patchy and inconsistent. Where groups exist and there is community involvement, that helps with partnership working and helps to build relationships. As I say, those groups are quite few and far between, so that would be helpful.

It is important to provide support to the community to participate. That could be practical support, such as access to, or support with using, digital devices, or supporting their capacity. The five organisations on the panel are the main organisations that work with the community, but there are a number of other community groups that are doing fantastic work; two spring to mind in Perth and Kinross. However, those groups need to be adequately resourced.

It is all very well saying that we want to engage and we want to work with the community, but if the community does not have the resources or the capacity to do that, it is essentially empty words. That is my view.

Maggie Chapman: Thanks—that is really helpful.

Lynne, can I have your comments on that too, please?

Dr Tammi: First off, it is right that we all need to work in partnership, but there needs to be equity and, sometimes, that is not there. We have directives—very good directives at times—coming from central Government down to local government and to the third sector. The offers are wonderful, and it is important to have good amounts of money, but it is then about how that is drawn down and dispersed at the local level. There is no consistency there. Indeed, a number of local authorities are not participating, or considering doing so, in what is on offer for equality for the community.

Certainly, there is a gap between the thinking in the third sector and the thinking coming out of central Government through policy and plans, and the understanding of that at local level by the street-level workers. By that, I mean the people who would be delivering, whether that is planning officers, housing officers, community development workers, social workers and so on. Although there is a good attempt to create a strong partnership, there is too much fragmentation, in my opinion.

We need agreement on how we consider the humanity and dignity of people. An example of that is what happens if a site is getting an upgrade and people are decanted. The general consensus down in England is that the local authority in question would have a piece of land that everyone would be decanted to, so that they would still be together and there would be room for trailers and so on. From my experience and understanding from people from the community who have come to me, that does not happen here.

The stress that that is putting on families is immeasurable, as is the trauma that will come after that. Families who rely on each other for support, including mental health support, cannot get it because their close family members are in other schemes or other streets. If there was an understanding at local level of the tightness of the Gypsy Traveller community, decisions would never be taken to house people all over a city, town or whatever.

If we are talking about working in partnership, we have to be sure that all actors in that partnership are fully aware of the culture and needs of the Gypsy Traveller community in that respect.

Maggie Chapman: Thanks—that is really helpful.

Lynne has just spoken about top-down directives and the mismatch or disconnect with the

local level. Maureen, you spoke in your opening remarks about the curriculum not necessarily being relevant to a Traveller community's lives and their experience. Can you give us other examples or explain a little more how we have not got that right?

Dr Finn: Yes. To echo some of the previous comments, there is a disconnect between national and regional delivery. As a great advocate of the changes that have been made in Scottish education over the past five years—in fact, I have been involved in many of them—I have to say that the situation is unrecognisable now. If you look at the top-level policy, you will see that there is no reason for Gypsy Traveller children not to have a personalised learning experience that is relevant to their culture and which equips them for whatever lives they lead. They should have the choice whether they want to lead a Traveller life or pursue other opportunities that are open to them.

The disconnect, I think, happens at leadership level in local authorities. As I have said, there is no continuity among services. For example, one local authority that I know—it probably has the most Gypsy Travellers in Scotland—has no education staff specifically dedicated to delivering outreach, in-reach or, indeed, any kind of services at all. That suggests that the matter is not covered in its strategic planning, which in turn suggests that the curriculum has not been designed to be relevant. Meanwhile, other authorities that might be smaller and have fewer Gypsy Travellers have very well-organised services that meet needs in a strategic way. They encourage children to go to primary school, pick up children who drop out, think about pathways and so on.

A good example of the non-interpretation of policy relates to attendance and the fact that the SEEMiS coding has become increasingly flexible over the years. Gypsy Travellers perceive the coding and tracking of their whereabouts and their children's attendance as one of the main barriers to their turning up at school, but there has been no communication from local authorities—or even, to be honest, at a national level—with regard to the fact that codes are designed to be flexible and to accommodate different lifestyles. I think that, if they were aware of that, they would not opt out and would work and have dialogue with local authorities to find more flexible solutions. That is one area of policy and practice where things could be much better and where policy is not being used as intended.

Finally, on the curriculum's irrelevance, the curriculum documents now, with the transformation of the curriculum, can accommodate Gypsy Traveller-based material. The issue is not what but how children learn. Problem-based approaches, real-life scenarios

and situations, intergenerational approaches, the use of technology, relationships and so on all form part of and are written into the curriculum and could meet Gypsy Travellers' needs. Unfortunately, that is not happening.

Maggie Chapman: Getting that right will be a significant challenge for education across the board.

Leslie, you, too, have talked about education and continuity of services. How could we use partnership working better to build continuity and embed it in the design of our services and functions? How does that sort of thing play out, and how does it support the young people with whom you work?

Leslie Drury: That is a great question. First, I just re-emphasise Dr Finn's comments about continuity and the difference between local authorities—[*Inaudible.*—]—for us. On the positive side, though, I will say that everyone whom we contact in local authorities is very eager to partner with us and very supportive of the goals that we can create together.

In a roadside education pilot that we recently launched, we were looking for families living on the roadside in the north-east and Highlands of Scotland to give them educational support, and we needed help from local authorities with references for, say, a family whom they knew were living roadside or had just come into the local area. Once we started trying to make those connections in a more detailed way than we had ever done before, we discovered that the structural design of who was responsible for handling Gypsy Traveller families living roadside was wildly different between local authorities.

Often, it seemed that the responsibility was simply assigned to whoever had the capacity. In some local authorities, there would be a Gypsy Traveller liaison officer, which was great, or there was an additional support needs teacher who had been assigned the young Gypsy Travellers remit. However, we often found that the person in charge was someone in housing, because the matter was thought of as a housing issue. As you can imagine, that person lacked training and capacity for all the other support and signposting that a Travelling family might need. The authority considered it an issue of housing and said, "They live roadside, so let's assign them to housing." We also saw cases where the issue was considered as simply about what site people were headed to or living on.

The matter was treated as a semantic—[*Inaudible.*—]—when, in fact, those families deserve a wide breadth of support and signposting. There was not much continuity between local authorities on that.

10:30

Maggie Chapman: Thank you—that is helpful.

Davie, you challenged us to move away from gesture politics. I have heard you and others speak about that before. One of the obvious questions is—*[Inaudible.]*—and what do we need to do differently? Do we need to do something different in our direct engagement with Gypsy Travelling communities? You spoke about the sustainability and continuity of funding being key. There is obviously a gap, disconnect or hole, intentional or otherwise. What are your thoughts on some of the ways through that for us?

Davie Donaldson: On one level, I congratulate the Government on recognising in the action plan that, when it comes to Gypsy Traveller inequalities, local politics and national politics can be totally disparate. The plan recognises the need for partnership working principally between the Scottish Government and COSLA. That is to be celebrated. However, my role as an activist and the role of Progress in Dialogue is to support grass-roots community champions to defeat their own marginalisation and to empower them to take the lead and take charge in their own right.

Partnership work needs to be much more localised and much more grass roots. There are some great strengths in supporting the third sector to act as a go-between and funding it to create projects to empower and sustain engagement with grass-roots communities, which I benefited from as a young activist. However, we need MSPs and local government representatives to work with their Gypsy Traveller constituents, be they constituents who live on a permanent site or constituents who move through their area regularly.

How does that engagement happen? How is it characterised and is it sustainable? My experience has been that it is not sustainable. It rarely happens and, if it does, that is because a particularly passionate politician, housing officer or GTLO pushes for it to happen. Therefore, I want us to think about how we can turn that into a system. How can we ensure that local Gypsy Travellers are supported to be empowered on issues that matter to them?

That is the partnership that is lacking and has been disconnected. We have focused on supporting the third sector and on it being a go-between between communities and authority, but we have overlooked the fact that there are some fantastic grass-roots communities that move into areas or might permanently be in them and have their own issues that matter to them geographically. How do we access those communities and talk to them without a go-between?

As an activist, the reason why I do my work is to try to ensure that equity is built so that Gypsy Traveller communities are treated no differently from settled communities. The issues that matter to Gypsy Travellers should matter to politicians and decision makers as much as the issues for settled communities. Politicians at a local level and, to a certain extent, a national level become scared. That is a challenge. I will use the word “fear”, because I have had a lot of conversations with local councillors in particular who have said, “I just don’t know how to do this.” I have been told, “I wouldn’t feel comfortable going on to a Gypsy Traveller site alone.” There is a real fear and, because of that, we fund the third sector to act as a go-between instead of thinking that, as authorities, our duty is to engage with those grass-roots communities directly.

Therefore, partnership is a bit of a mixed bag for me. What has been done thus far should be celebrated, and there is a role for the third sector, but it is being made to fill in for the gaps and lack of action from authorities.

Maggie Chapman: Thanks—that is really clear.

Convener, I will be guided by you. I know that Suzanne Munday wants to come back in briefly, but I am conscious that I have maybe hogged the questions, so we should move on.

The Convener: It would be good to move on. If Suzanne has something in particular to say, I am sure that she will find a point at which to get back in.

Karen Adam (Banffshire and Buchan Coast) (SNP): I thank our witnesses for being not just insightful but educational. In particular, Davie Donaldson spoke about engagement in our constituencies with our Gypsy Traveller community. I will certainly take that away, so thank you for that.

This morning, I have heard a bit about where things in the action plan have perhaps stalled. The pandemic has been highlighted as the reason for that, of course. The pandemic aside, will each witness give me a little insight into parts of the plan that have stalled overall or been held up? We will start with Suzanne Munday.

Suzanne Munday: I will echo what witnesses have previously said. The biggest frustration—this is certainly something that has been fed back to us—is the progress on provision of more and better accommodation, which is possibly the overriding priority in the action plan. For example, there has been progress, in that there is the “Interim Site Design Guide for Gypsy/Traveller Sites in Scotland provided by Local Authorities and Registered Social Landlords”. Community members have been involved in that, and its first

iteration has been published, but the issue is the ability to drive forward change.

We have been working with community members on the part of “Housing to 2040” that deals with accommodation centres. We understand that some of the delays have been due to things that are beyond the control of local authorities, the Scottish Government and Parliament—for example, Brexit, and the impact of Covid, which, essentially, has involved society shutting down for more than two years now. However, we know from the community that there is a lack of site accommodation and there are issues with the planning system. Davie Donaldson talked about roadside camps and traditional stopping places. Those are probably the things that have been delayed most and have fuelled the sense of frustration within the community.

Karen Adam: Thank you very much. Can I ask the question of Dr Finn, please?

Dr Finn: I suppose that there are two things. The first is the fact that access to working with the community has been stalled during the pandemic, which has gone on for a long time. One of our initiatives was to increase uptake of the 1,140 hours of early years childcare and education. The community just did not want to be concerned with that, at the time, because so much else was going on.

We also got involved in many other things, as well; we actually spent much more time on strategic planning and working with a cohort of local authorities. One of the strong messages that came out of that was that delivery cannot be coherent across authorities and that there must be local and regional differences. That is the case not just because of the geographical spread of the families but because of the nature of the families’ lives—how they travel, whether they go to school and whether they live in houses or on sites. It is a whole different ball game.

We managed to modify approaches, so we now have a national guide for teachers, staff and everyone else, and we are delivering that successfully—we have done 100 of those and we are now on to our second round of 100. We are working with about six local authorities to do that. That has been a kind of benefit from the pandemic.

What has stalled for us, however, is community advocacy, although I do not take issue with what Davie Donaldson said. As an organisation, we work on a consultancy and research basis directly with families. Although we are not a third sector organisation—we have a strange position, because we are part of a knowledge exchange at the university—we deliver national messages in a

way that could be seen as the kind of thing that a third sector organisation would do.

We try to get as broad a national picture as possible by consulting communities and trying to make sense of that. Community advocates are essential to that process, but we are struggling to redevelop relationships with people—particularly young people, including young mums and so on—who could become community advocates. They could be trained to lead healthcare workshops and so on, and could have their literacy skills increased so that they have the confidence to set up groups and to be advocates for their own educational processes.

The big challenge is that there is a need for a lot of community advocates, because one voice cannot represent every aspect of a community. We need young mums who have lots of children, people who live on sites, people who travel a lot and so on. We need to get a national picture, but people are not as keen to get involved in advocacy as they might otherwise be, because there is so much going on. However, that might just be our experience; I do not know.

Karen Adam: That is helpful.

Dr Tammi: I was taken by the point that Maureen Finn just made about the need for many advocates and the issue of self-advocacy. Everything is linked; all the issues that we have spoken about, including accommodation, employability and education are linked. People need to have a voice that enables them to truly participate and not just be involved in consultation exercises that bring in a few voices to represent the whole.

In order to bring that about, we need to go back to first principles and work on capacity building. If we want to encourage young people, for example, to be advocates, we have to accept that we cannot just hand someone empowerment in a jug and say, “There you are: have this empowerment. Off you go.” Society has not been levelled; there are higher and lower levels, so people need help, especially if they have not been engaged in the normal democratic decision-making processes.

The third sector has a continuing role in that regard. Leslie Drury can speak for her organisation much better than I can, but at the heart of what needs to be done is work with young people to build capacity in them to enable them to consider accessing apprenticeships, for example, even if that involves online learning that can give them the core skills that they did not get at school. There has to be a point at which everyone is brought to the same level. That involves empowerment through true participation and capacity building.

We do ourselves a disservice if we talk about getting rid of a layer of support. I did a community development course many years ago; the grounding in that stressed the importance of not setting people up to fail. There must be an equal partnership in sharing learning with people—it has to be understood that people have to have their critical consciousness opened up, and that comes through capacity building.

Leslie Drury: A major part of what Suzanne Munday has mentioned is the idea that much of the action plan is the result of many of us pushing for education and capacity building.

A key part of the action plan, on tackling racism and discrimination, needs a much clearer way forward. We are hearing from our young people that action in that area is essential for them—it is something that they want to get involved in. We have also heard that from community members who work with MECOPP. Our young people are very ready to have a louder voice and to feel empowered in that area.

We need a clear way forward; we need to know what action in that area will actually look like. The Scottish Government has been working on that, and there will be things happening in the near future. However, just to emphasise what Dr Tammi said, I point out that the young people are there and they are ready; we just need to help them to come centre stage.

10:45

Davie Donaldson: Many points in the action plan have stalled, and many excuses have been tabled, including Covid. We are moving into a time of fewer restrictions and freer movement; we are not under the same restrictions as we were in the first lockdown, for example. We need to start being realistic about what we expect of the action plan and where we expect the action plan to come forward with action.

Some of the points that I was going to touch on have already been articulated by the other witnesses, but one point that I will touch on, which very much follows on from what Leslie Drury said, is the “movement for change”, which is the wording in the action plan. That is about the need to tackle the racism and discrimination that persist towards Gypsies and Travellers in Scotland.

As an activist, I work with many local authorities on accommodation and what are, at times, quite complex and unwieldy issues, for example funding streams. When we boil it right down, the problem does not lie with how the funding gets distributed, where the funding comes from or whether funding exists. It lies in human action and human thought about Gypsy Traveller communities. Gypsy Traveller communities are funded less often and

their services are not given adequate attention. We have heard some good examples of engagement, but some local authorities do not have a worker to engage with Gypsy Travellers in a sustainable way. The reason for that is racism. It boils down to Gypsy Travellers being treated differently because they are seen as different or are not seen at all.

Gypsy Travellers must be given the empowerment that they need. I agree with Lynne Tammi. I said earlier that I owe a lot of my current activism to the early start that I got in being developed as an activist. That is important, but we need a real shift in direction. We might be delivering on accommodation, but if that happens in a silo it will not change anything. We need to change society’s views about Gypsy Travellers, and the only way we can do that is by tackling unconscious bias, stereotypes and the discrimination that surrounds us.

The way to do that is by empowering Gypsy Travellers to be seen. Most of the time when Gypsy Traveller community champions are seen and heard, people leave thinking, “That’s not what I expected. That’s not what I was told Gypsy Travellers are. That’s not what I was brought up thinking.” That is what we need to see and hear in order for any of the action to be long standing, and in order to bring about change.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): Good morning, and thank you for your comments so far.

I want to ask about the plan. As we know, five themes have been drawn out in the plan: accommodation, access to public services, better incomes, tackling racism and discrimination, and better representation. Davie Donaldson talked about the rhetoric. It is good to have all of those themes, but not all of them are working at the same level across the sector. What do you think will develop in the long term? At the moment, the biggest issue that is facing any individual is probably the cost of living crisis, which has a massive impact on all those themes.

It would be good to hear about priorities. Is any one of the themes seen as having a higher priority than the others or as overtaking the others in terms of the progress that is being made on it, or are they simply running in parallel with one another? Perhaps we can hear from Davie Donaldson first, as he has already expressed some very strong views on the matter.

Davie Donaldson: All the themes intersect. It would be wrong to say that accommodation is more important than employability or vice versa, but I think that we need to focus slightly more on that particular issue. We have all been focusing on accommodation; although there are many partners

seated around the table, many others are not represented, so we must think about how different partners can deliver the labour and how we can ensure that we do not miss areas and themes as we prioritise others, which I would say has been happening, up to now.

I have recently become acutely aware of employability and cost of living issues. Much of my engagement is with Gypsy Traveller men, many of whom are really worried about their businesses. Very few of them have what we would term professional training or professional qualifications; most of them have learned their skills either orally and were taught them by other Gypsy Travellers—principally, their fathers or brothers.

Moreover, most Gypsy Traveller men have not had the formal education that many settled people take for granted, so although there are issues with formal education settings, we need to start thinking more about how we help Gypsy Traveller young people to access employment sectors that Gypsy Travellers might not have accessed traditionally, while ensuring that they do not feel that they have to constrain their way of living in order to have a certain occupation. That issue needs to be looked at.

As for reducing daily living costs, some great work on that has been happening locally, but it is not cohesive and it certainly does not go across the board. The question is this: how do we take models that have been proved to work, and to have made a significant impact on families, and broaden them out, taking a national perspective?

Furthermore, when we look at the issue of living costs, we cannot overlook the movement towards a cashless society. That is not an problem for most people, but for some people who have no fixed address or no formal education, it can be almost impossible, say, to open a bank account without the correct support.

How are we supporting people at the national level? Again, some local work is happening on that, which is great, but we need to broaden it out. To Gypsy Travellers who have support and are able to access employability measures, the cashless society will not matter, but there are others who are totally on the edge who, financially speaking, face great difficulty as we move towards a cashless society.

Alexander Stewart: Suzanne, in your opening remarks, you talked about frustrations in the sector. It would be good to hear your views on how the themes are being managed. Is there, for example, frustration with the process for developing long-term access?

Suzanne Munday: As far as frustration is concerned, one of my colleagues said at the very beginning of the meeting that the joint work

involving partners, the Scottish Government and COSLA during the particularly acute phase of the pandemic showed what could be achieved when there is the will, and how very bureaucratic and administration-heavy systems can be adapted and made flexible to enable better partnership working. That is, therefore, a model that we could try to take forward, because we do not want to lose the learning from what was an effective approach.

For me, the main frustration is that the action plan, by its very nature, has a time limit. The question, therefore, is this: what happens beyond the action plan's lifespan? Working on equality for the community is everybody's responsibility; we need to see how the plan will be embedded in housing, education, health and social care, and the criminal justice system—indeed, in everything.

Alexander Stewart: Thank you. Lynne, you spoke about the grass roots and said that there is a lot of disparity in terms of how councils manage things, so is there a difference in terms of how successful the five themes have been in different council areas?

Dr Tammi: Yes. As others said—Leslie Drury made the point well when she spoke about her charity's work in reaching families who are living roadside—some local authorities have Gypsy Traveller liaison officers and some appoint teachers or someone from the housing department. That demonstrates that there is no continuity of service, because although all those people are professionals and are probably very good in their professions, there will be differences in how they all operate and their knowledge of the community. I do not think there could ever be continuity of service when there are such differences in the skills and knowledge of the people who are appointed. Also, some local authority areas do not appoint anyone.

If I may, I will go back to what others have said, because I want to talk about capacity building. Ensuring that members of the community have a voice is about capacity building. If people are not seen and heard, perhaps that is because they do not have the confidence to be seen and heard, and do not feel that they have the backing of their local authority, its elected representatives and people like yourselves—members of the Scottish Parliament. It is about building their capacity.

It is also necessary to build capacity among the professionals who work with the community. Perhaps a network needs to be established. I know that STEP has TENET—the traveller education network—which is a network of teachers. It works well, so perhaps we need to consider creating a network in which all the people who are involved, whatever their profession, can come together and have their capacity built so that they feel confident.

Earlier, I mentioned people not feeling confident because they are not sure about the culture and are worried that they will get something wrong. That takes us back to first principles: we need to look at what knowledge Gypsies and Travellers and the professionals who work with them have so that they feel confident about working together.

I hope that that answered your question; I know I went on a wee bit.

Alexander Stewart: Thank you very much. Time is pressing, and my questions have been answered, but if others want to contribute I am more than happy to give them some time.

Pam Duncan-Glancy (Glasgow) (Lab): I thank the witnesses for joining us today and for the helpful answers that they have given so far.

I want to extend part of the conversation that we have just had and talk about the cost of living. Specifically, I am keen to know about lived experience of fuel poverty. Are the needs of the communities that you represent sufficiently addressed in Scotland's fuel poverty strategy and the action plan? Does further work need to be done, given the upcoming increase to the price cap and the expected increase in energy prices? I am also keen to hear a bit more about the impact of a cashless society, which David Donaldson mentioned.

The Convener: Are those questions aimed at anyone in particular, Pam?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: I will start with David, because I am quite intrigued by the concept of a cashless society and how we can address the related issues and support people through the cost of living crisis.

11:00

Davie Donaldson: I will leave it to Suzanne Munday to answer the questions on the fuel poverty strategy, because I know that some work is already happening on that.

On a cashless society, I reiterate that, for many people who live in housing or, broadly speaking, the settled community, either it will not impact on them or the impact will not be as large as it will be for the Gypsy Traveller community. That is because the Gypsy Traveller community has traditionally relied on cash, principally because opening a bank account can be quite difficult if you have literacy issues or a lack of formal education. Also, if we boil it down to the basics, if you do not have a permanent address, it can be very difficult to gain access to those services.

When it comes to a cashless society in general, I do not think that central Government has paid enough attention, or the attention that it should

have paid, to its impact on all communities. At Progress in Dialogue, we support a range of marginalised communities, and many of them are really concerned about the move towards a cashless society.

When it comes to Gypsy Travellers, we need to think about how we are going to support people to improve their employability and work to mitigate the impacts of the rise in the cost of living and the move towards a cashless society. The two things have to marry up—we cannot silo them off. If we are talking about employability and supporting Gypsy Travellers, perhaps on to different career paths, we also need to think about the impact on the traditional career paths of Gypsy Traveller people.

I will hand over to Suzanne Munday, if that is all right, to pick up on the fuel poverty strategy.

Suzanne Munday: I thank Pam Duncan-Glancy for the question. A point that is coming across really strongly is just how interconnected everything is. We cannot look at fuel poverty without looking at the quality of accommodation for the community. If that accommodation is not wind and watertight, fuel costs for heating and so on will go up. We also know from our work with the community that people are already struggling with debt management in relation to energy costs, so they are starting from that financial disadvantage. A lot of families rely on bottled gas, which is really expensive.

We have families who do not have access to an individual energy account. It is quite technical, so forgive me if this sounds a bit confusing. I am never quite sure about this, but our understanding is that, on some local authority sites, the local authority is the principal account holder, and individuals on the site buy energy from the local authority. If that is the arrangement, people are limited in being able to find the most cost-effective tariffs for themselves.

That links back to the issue of the digital divide, because so many of those deals require you to go online and be able to search. I know that I find that quite confusing, but if you do not have a device, you are not confident in using information technology or you have problems with connectivity, those are additional barriers. All those things are interconnected.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Convener, is it okay if I ask a couple of supplementary questions?

The Convener: If they are on the same area, yes. I then have a couple of other folk to bring in.

Pam Duncan-Glancy: Thanks. They are on the same area.

Suzanne, do you have any information from the people that you represent about likely increases in

tariffs, particularly where the local authority is the provider or the account holder? Can anything be done to mitigate the impact of that being passed on, while recognising the costs that the local authority will have?

My other question is slightly broader, but it is still on the cost of living. What can we do to make sure that Social Security Scotland can provide the best possible service to the Gypsy Traveller community? We have heard from most of the panel about the need to make sure that there is training and engagement with the community and an understanding of the interconnected aspects. That also relates to the point about a cashless society.

Suzanne Munday: We do not have hard evidence on what the additional cost is going to be. What we have heard directly from community members are just huge worries, which are probably akin to those of the settled population, about the cost of fuel and its impact on household incomes. The community is already financially disadvantaged. There is potentially a piece of work to be done on that.

On what local authorities can do, we have been made aware of funding that is going out to local authorities to help to offset or mitigate to some extent the increase in the cost of living. I think that it is called the LACER fund—the local authority Covid economic recovery fund. It would be interesting to know how much of that, if any, is being directed towards helping Gypsy Traveller communities to offset any increased costs that they have.

We are aware of work that has been done by two local authorities—Perth and Kinross Council is the one that springs to mind—that have worked with local community groups on vouchers that have been distributed to members of the Gypsy Traveller community in order to help to meet those increases in the cost of living. However, when it comes to the Scotland-wide picture, we have no further evidence. There is a piece of work to be done on that.

The Scottish Government is undertaking some research to look at the community's experience of Social Security Scotland and the welfare benefits system. That work is on-going and we are aware that Gypsy Traveller community members are part of that research. We await the results and hope to take forward any recommendations.

The Convener: Do you want to bring in anybody else, Pam?

Pam Duncan-Glancy: No, unless David Donaldson or anyone else has anything to add. I think that Davie wants to comment. Sorry, Davie—I have been calling you David. That might be your Sunday name.

Davie Donaldson: That is all right. I have a quick comment about a model of good practice that should be noted and perhaps encouraged in other areas.

Progress in Dialogue worked closely with Aberdeenshire Council, principally over the winter months of 2020-21—it seems so long ago—to produce and enact a flexible wellbeing fund that supported marginalised communities to access funding that had always been available from the local authority, but had been available in such a way that it was not accessible or people were not comfortable about accessing it. We had a network of community champions from marginalised communities, including some from Gypsy Traveller communities—many of our applicants were Gypsy Travellers—and they took calls, supported people with paperwork and supported families to access funding that was given to them directly to support them through the winter.

We are now moving to another fund that will look at the cost of living crisis. It will open in the next couple of months and, again, it will be open to all marginalised communities. However, I note that, off the top of my head, 65 to 70 per cent of applicants to the previous fund were from Gypsy Traveller families. That could be used as a model in other places. It involves working with people, organisations and communities that have strong relationships with marginalised communities in order to enable them to access pre-existing funding to support people on the cost of living.

Dr Tammi: Suzanne Munday talked about local authorities being the buyer, if you like, of fuel and selling it on to residents on sites. It is important to state that that issue is not new. Way back in about 2011, we were engaged in trying to negotiate on a site because the local authority was setting the unit price on the meters. The residents had no option to look for another provider. The local authority decided which company to buy electricity from, and then it sold that on through its meters.

I always find that arrangement a bit odd, anyway. I am not sure that it is the local authority's role to be an intermediary by buying fuel and selling it on. There have been several on-going issues around that since before 2011. People could not afford fuel and they had utility units that they could not heat, so they were showering and cooking in freezing cold units. That is not new, and it is not because of the current crisis; it has been a long-running, on-going issue. I would like that issue to be addressed, given where we are all sitting at the moment.

Fulton MacGregor (Coatbridge and Chryston) (SNP): My main question is about the 18-month extension to the action plan, which I know has been discussed a fair amount already. Do you think that 18 months is enough time? I am

happy for the panellists to give their thoughts in any order.

The Convener: Fulton, will you direct the question? Otherwise, broadcasting does not know where to direct the camera.

Fulton MacGregor: I am happy to start with Davie Donaldson. I will put him on the spot.

Davie Donaldson: It is difficult to answer that. The pandemic is not over, although the lockdown is. However, we are still seeing its impact in many different ways. Much of the local authority provision and support is still to be taken forward locally after it was suspended during the last lockdown. Some people still prefer not to interact physically. We have to recognise that disability and long-term health conditions are very prevalent in the Gypsy Traveller community. Many people in our community are still very cautious about people coming to see them and about physical meetings.

We need to have a deadline, because the action plan cannot go on for ever. It needs to remain an action plan and not be just a list of things that we would like to happen someday. Eighteen months is a good period of time.

I go back to Suzanne Munday's point about sustainability and where we go next, which might be a better conversation to have. Post the 18-month period, where will we be, what will we do and what will the funding look like? How will we engage with the Gypsy Traveller community at that stage, and where will we look to enhance accommodation?

I had a conversation with a Gypsy Traveller yesterday whose site is undergoing some renovation. They were not too happy with what was happening on the site. They said that the work is very much a facelift. People feel that the work is aesthetic, as it is not improving the heating for the chalets or the blocks or increasing the numbers of people who can stay on the site, as it is still the same size. It is not improving the standard of living on the site.

There seems to be a disconnect with what we are hearing from COSLA and the local authorities. It is good that they are spending the money, but that money may not be getting spent in the way that Gypsy Travellers want it to be, or there may simply not be enough money to make a significant difference on the sites for Gypsy Traveller people. The real conversation is about what we do post the 18-month period.

Fulton MacGregor: That is very helpful. I did not see anyone else indicate that they wanted to comment. Would Suzanne Munday like to respond briefly?

Suzanne Munday: A lot has been said already, but I agree with Davie Donaldson that it has to be

about sustainability. We are not going to make wholesale change across all the priorities in the action plan within 18 months. The further we dig and the more that we go into things, the more things are uncovered, and there will always be new priorities emerging from the community.

11:15

The key issue is sustainability. It is about how that becomes embedded in everything that we do, from the professional education of practitioners across the board to the work that looks at the structures and processes and, most important, how the community is supported to be at the very heart of it.

Fulton MacGregor: Thanks for that. Before I hand back to the convener, I put on record my thanks for all the work that the witnesses have done over the past few years in tackling head on the unacceptable discrimination that Gypsy Travellers face. I have come across you all in various guises over the past couple of years, in the predecessor committee to this one and at various cross-party groups.

I hope that the convener does not mind me telling this wee story, but I was at an event on Sunday at the Glasgow Pavilion—it was a children's show and I took my two boys to it. Something happened that I think indicates how much work you have done that perhaps sometimes goes unnoticed.

The play was about dinosaurs and stuff like that; it was really good. It was a lively show and the audience were interacting and laughing. That is the context.

There was one comment that showed unconscious bias. One of the actresses used the word "tinker". She meant nothing by it and she was referring to a child, so it was not a reference to Gypsy Travellers. However, there was a kind of gasp from the audience—so much so that my kids asked me what a tinker was, and I could hear another kid away over on the other side of the hall asking the same question. It was quite a lively show and that was the audience response to that comment. Five years ago, perhaps, that might have got a laugh or something like that. I thought about this evidence session and I reflected that that change is partly down to all the work that the witnesses that are in front of us have put in.

I hope that you do not mind me sharing that story. It dawned on me earlier, when people were talking, that perhaps I was meant to be there on Sunday, with this evidence session coming up just two days later. I feel that I almost have a responsibility to share that story and praise the good work that you have done. You will not see the societal changes because you are living the

