

Cross-Party Group on Scottish Gypsy/Travellers

22nd November 2023: 1.00pm – 2.00pm, Scottish Parliament.

Minute

Present

MSPs

David Torrance MSP - Convenor
Maggie Chapman MSP – Deputy Convenor
John Mason MSP

Non-MSP Group Members

Lynne Tammi - Aye Right [Secretariat]
Dominique Barr – COSLA
Zoe Hisbent – Office of David Torrance
Maren Schroeder - Office of Ash Regan
Leslie Drury – Article 12
Bernadette Williamson – Article 12
Mark Lawson – Scottish Government
Rebecca Wilson – Scottish Government
Shirell Johnson – MECOPP
Virginia Francis – Community Member
Tommy Bennett – Community Member
Iain Shamus McPhee – Community Member
Roseanna McPhee – Community Member
Jaqueline McCallum – Community Member
Female Community Member
Female Community Member
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Apologies

Dorothy Ogle – Scottish Government
Davide Bargna – Scottish Government

Agenda item 1

David Torrance MSP welcomed attendees to the meeting. Apologies received were read out.

Agenda item 2 – Annual general meeting and election of office bearers

David Torrance welcomed participants to the Annual General Meeting of the CPG and proceeded to the election of office bearers. David Torrance was proposed as Convenor by Maggie Chapman and seconded by John Mason and elected. Maggie Chapman was proposed as Deputy Convenor by John Mason and seconded by David Torrance and elected. Lynne Tammi was proposed as Secretariat by Iain Shamus McPhee and seconded by Maggie Chapman and elected.

Agenda item 3 – Minute of the previous meeting

Minute of the meeting of 20th September 2023 was approved. The minute was proposed by John Mason and seconded by Maggie Chapman.

Agenda item 4 – Matters arising

1. Gypsy/Roma/Traveller History Month, parliament exhibitions and debate:

Maggie Chapman gave an update on the hosting of exhibitions in parliament as a means to raising awareness. There is no space available during History Month in 2024, however she has managed to book out a week later in the year – Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday of the first week of October. There are no restrictions on displays and a video screen will also be available.

Virginia Francis noted that it is as important to raise awareness of contemporary issues as it is of history. Failing to do so as a means of bringing about positive change could essentially mean we become history.

David Torrance proposed that a debate in parliament be held during the week with all interested being invited as audience members in the chamber. All agreed.

Iain Shamus McPhee noted that this would be a good avenue to address the injustices

of the past such as enforced settlement and the trafficking of Gypsy/Traveller children to the colonies.

David Torrance confirmed that these are all issues that can be discussed at the debate.

Leslie Drury stated that Article 12 would be happy to ensure that young Gypsy/Travellers are part of the exhibition plans and attend the parliamentary debate.

2. Accommodation:

Tommy Bennett raised the issue of accommodation noting that discussions need to be about what is happening on the ground, now. While policy is not in itself bad, it can be misinterpreted and lead to bad or unfair practice when dealing with planning applications, local authority responsibilities to provide suitable accommodation and so on. Additionally, there needs to be clarity around policy as it applies to Gypsy/Travellers – much of the policy refers to housing meaning that utility units, blocks and so on often fail the ‘upgrade test’ as they are not considered housing or homes. The result being that families are having to make use of substandard blocks, often with no heating or efficient cladding.

Iain Shamus McPhee noted the evident disparity between new site provision/existing site upgrades. Citing Perth and Kinross as a case in point. For example, residents of Bobbin Mill are residing in wooden chalets which they themselves identified and acquired from a holiday park and have had little in the way of upgrades, whereas another local authority site in the area has had several upgrades in recent years.

Roseanna McPhee informed the group of recent changes to site residents’ status on local authority sites in Perth and Kinross. 1) The downgrading of chalets to caravans and the changing of tenancy agreements to occupancy agreements – residents felt that this diminished their tenancy rights. 2) There appears to be attempts to redefine what a Gypsy/Traveller is, i.e., wording in policy documents suggests that if you are not nomadic then you will not be considered a Gypsy/Traveller. Thus, defining the community by a cultural practice rather than by ethnic status.

A female community member asked if there was an extension to the Accommodation Fund and what was the criteria for the awarding of funding to local authorities. Dominique Barr said that she would need to check the progress of existing awards and if any new funding would be available as this is a jointly owned area of work between COSLA and the Scottish Government. Adding that it was not COSLA who made the decision around which local authority received funding – the decisions being made by an advisory board. She does understand that the fact that not all local authorities apply presents difficulties for those community members in need of an upgrade or a new site. David Torrance agreed to investigate the progress of current funding/any new funding.

A male community member raised the issue of the forthcoming evictions [1st December] of families from privately owned yards in Perth and Kinross. Noting that the process to date has felt aggressive [the attendance of police and so on] lacked clear information [i.e., eviction notices posted on fences] and, in the absence of a support package including an offer of alternative accommodation, has left people fearful of being homeless and on the road in the winter months. One community member received a

communication stating that the key reason for their planning application being rejected was 'because it was a Gypsy/Traveller site'. The male community member has video recordings of local authority staff and police visits.

David Torrance noted that although this was a local authority issue/action, given the immediacy of the eviction he would follow this up directly with Perth and Kinross Council. The community member, and other community members present who are also affected, provided David Torrance with the information necessary for him to proceed.

Virginia Francis pointed out that it seemed to be a lottery regarding how local authorities are providing new or upgrading existing sites. Whilst new or upgraded sites are welcome, there is an issue with pitches being 'shaved' from existing sites effectively meaning that there are less pitches which results in people being made homeless and/or being 'forced' into houses. So, although the action plan is delivering improvements to pitches is not in reality delivering more accommodation.

Roseanna McPhee raised the issue of rents and council tax. Noting that those residing in low or substandard accommodation were getting a 'raw deal' in relation to what they are being charged. For example, the council tax bands assigned to chalets are not reflective of their standard. She would like to see a review of both council tax and rents across the board.

3. Other business:

Zoe Hisbent informed the meeting that 29 local authorities had responded to the request for information regarding what support/provision they were making for Gypsy/Travellers. One late response meant that the paper was not ready to be tabled at the meeting. It will be sent to Lynne Tammi when completed who will in turn circulate it to group members.

Dominique Barr reminded the group that COSLA/Scottish Government were currently undertaking a 'listening exercise' and the hope was to produce a draft outcomes report by March 2024. Lynne Tammi asked if there were any restrictions on what could be discussed as part of the exercise. Dominique Barr responded that any pertinent issue could be tabled. Iain Shamus McPhee noted that none he knew had been contacted directly to participate in the exercise and that the exercise should include discussions around much more than what is in the action plan.

Lynne Tammi gave a brief update on her Crowdfunded visit to Brockville, Canada to research the trafficking of Gypsy/Traveller children to Canada by Quarrier's Homes. Amongst other things she worked with cemeteries archivists and museum staff to research the names of 39 children and young people who were buried in an unmarked grave owned by Quarrier's Homes. Her video diaries of the visit are currently being made into a short film. When it's ready, she will share the link with the group.

Lynne Tammi asked if group members would like a voice recording of the paper and minutes of group meetings in addition to the typed documents. All agreed.

Agenda Item 5 – Date, place, time of next meeting

February 21st, 2024, 6.00pm – 8.00pm, Online.