

MECOPP

WRITTEN SUBMISSION

The MECOPP Gypsy/Traveller Carer's Project is disappointed to find there is no specific mention of the accommodation needs of Gypsy/Travellers in the Bill.

1. Where Gypsy/Travellers Live

In 2013 the Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee published the findings of their 'Where Gypsy/Travellers Live' inquiry (<http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/CurrentCommittees/49027.aspx>)

This report clearly highlights the urgent need to address the accommodation needs of Gypsy/Travellers across Scotland. During the inquiry Committee members heard evidence about the absence of tenancy rights and the high rents being charged on sites run by local authorities and Registered Social Landlords (RSL), they also saw for themselves the appalling living conditions experienced by many families on these sites.

Unfortunately, there was little in the Scottish Government's response to this report to inspire hope that these conditions and needs will be addressed in a robust and timely manner. The response is especially weak on actions and timescales and we remain unclear as to exactly **how** and **when** the widespread, and well-documented, inequalities faced by Gypsy/Traveller families will be tackled and addressed.

2. The need for a legal framework

Like any other community, Gypsy/Travellers have a variety of accommodation needs which require a range of responses, rather than the wholly inadequate approach that has been taken to date. Despite the popular misconception, Gypsy/Travellers are not asking for 'special treatment' rather accommodation which meets their cultural needs and parity with other local authority/RSL tenants.

Over the last forty years local authorities have been reluctant providers of sites and it is clear from community members themselves, agencies working directly with Gypsy/Travellers and the findings of the 'Where Gypsy/Travellers Live' inquiry that current provision does not meet either existing or future needs. Council/RSL site provision across Scotland is remarkably uniform in terms of both design and management, the need for serious consideration,

and resourcing, of alternative ways of meeting the varying accommodation needs of Gypsy/Travellers is long overdue.

Arguably, the lack of a statutory framework for Gypsy/Traveller accommodation in Scotland has denied occupiers of public provision access to a reasonable mechanism for complaint/redress outwith internal complaints processes, where they exist. Gypsy/Travellers are effectively debarred from questioning or disputing decisions of local government in the field of accommodation services except by Judicial Review. We view the absence of a clear statutory framework as a serious omission that has severely disadvantaged families from finding a suitable place to stop or stay. This approach is open to abuse and contrary to the ethos underpinning equalities legislation and the proposed Housing Bill.

Currently, tenancy agreements on local authority/RSL sites vary from area to area. Some tenants feel the agreements are heavily weighted towards the council and others argue, when there is a potential breach, the tenancy agreement is in reality unenforceable. As noted above, where there are disagreements or disputes, many Gypsy/Travellers face great difficulties in accessing legal advice in order to challenge the disputed issues. Wherever possible, tenants on local authority and RSL sites should have the same rights as other social housing tenants. The Housing (Scotland) Bill presents an opportunity to address this inequality.

3. Conclusion

As for other sectors of society, MECOPP would like to see the development of a diverse and comprehensive accommodation strategy but, in the case of Gypsy/Travellers, this must also be linked to a wider anti-racist strategy to counter discriminatory decision-making and stereotypical attitudes.

The Housing (Scotland) Bill covers a wide range of issues with the overall objectives of, “...*safeguarding the interests of consumers, supporting improved quality and delivering better outcomes for communities.*” We urge members of the Infrastructure and Capital Investment Committee to take this opportunity to ensure that better outcomes can also be delivered for Scotland’s Gypsy/Travellers.

MECOPP
27 February 2014