



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Thursday 19 February 2015

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CONTENTS

	Col.
DECISION ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	1
INQUIRIES INTO THE LIVES OF GYPSY TRAVELLERS	2

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

3rd Meeting 2015, Session 4

CONVENER

*Margaret McCulloch (Central Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP)

*Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab)

*John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con)

*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

William Fleming (Scottish Government)

Lesley Irving (Scottish Government)

Alex Neil (Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights)

David Thomson (Scottish Government)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Ruth McGill

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Thursday 19 February 2015

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:45]

Decision on Taking Business in Private

The Convener (Margaret McCulloch): Welcome to the third meeting in 2015 of the Equal Opportunities Committee. Please set any electronic devices to flight mode or switch them off.

We will start with introductions. We are supported at the table by clerking and research staff, official reporters and broadcasting services and, around the room, by security officers. I welcome the observers in the public gallery. My name is Margaret McCulloch and I am the committee's convener. Members will introduce themselves in turn, starting on my right.

Sandra White (Glasgow Kelvin) (SNP): Good morning. I am the MSP for Glasgow Kelvin.

Christian Allard (North East Scotland) (SNP): Good morning. I am an MSP for North East Scotland.

Jayne Baxter (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Lab): Good morning. I am an MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife.

John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP): Good morning. I am the MSP for Glasgow Shettleston.

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind): Good morning. I am an MSP for Highlands and Islands.

The Convener: The first agenda item is a decision on taking business in private. Members are asked to agree to take in private item 3, which is consideration of the evidence heard during today's meeting, and item 4, which is discussion of our approach to an inquiry on race. Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

Inquiries into the Lives of Gypsy Travellers

09:46

The Convener: Agenda item 2 is an evidence session with the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights as part of our inquiry into the lives of Gypsy Travellers. I welcome the cabinet secretary and his accompanying officials. Cabinet secretary, I ask you and your officials to introduce yourselves, and I invite you to make some opening remarks.

The Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights (Alex Neil): Thank you, convener. I will begin by introducing myself and the officials. Obviously, my name is Alex Neil MSP and I am the Cabinet Secretary for Social Justice, Communities and Pensioners' Rights. On my left is David Thomson, who is head of primary care in the health division in the Scottish Government; on my immediate right is Lesley Irving, who is part of the equalities unit in the Scottish Government; and on my far right—I am sure that that is not the case politically—is William Fleming, who is from the housing division in the Scottish Government.

Although I do not have with me someone from every division or department that is involved in the issue, I thought that having officials from health, equalities and housing would be useful in showing how we are taking a pan-Government approach to the issue of Gypsy Travellers. I could also have had officials from planning, local government, education and a range of other departments, but I just wanted to give the committee a flavour of how the strategy on Gypsy Travellers is being developed right across the whole Government.

I am delighted to be here again at the Equal Opportunities Committee so soon after my recent appearance before the committee to speak in support of the Scottish Government's efforts in relation to provisions for the Gypsy Traveller communities. As members will be aware, after the recent Cabinet reshuffle I now have responsibility for the issue, although when I was Minister for Housing and Communities five or six years ago I had responsibility for this area of policy. I am fully committed to meeting the needs of Scotland's Gypsy Travellers, who remain one of the most disenfranchised and discriminated against communities in Scotland.

I recognise the great work that the committee has done on the issue up to this point. Its two recent inquiries—on Gypsy Travellers and care, and where Gypsy Travellers live—have underpinned our activity and shaped our agenda over the past two years.

As the committee recommended, the Scottish Government is working to develop an overarching strategy and action plan for Gypsy Travellers, which we expect to publish this summer. The strategy is being developed in consultation with a range of key stakeholders via the Gypsy Traveller strategy development group, which includes members of the Gypsy Traveller community; I know that the committee quite rightly attaches a great deal of importance to that.

In relation to accommodation, ministers and officials have visited sites, met key groups and convened a national site working group to gather views and consider the issues further. Our role is to set a robust framework and to promote good practice so that the accommodation needs can be properly assessed and met at a local level. We have already delivered new guidance on local housing strategies and housing needs demand assessments that stresses the need to assess and fully take into account the accommodation requirements of Gypsy Travellers. We have taken on board the lessons and information gathered through our visits and meetings to set out a clear plan of action for the months ahead, which will include publishing minimum standards for local authority Gypsy Traveller sites that every site must adhere to.

In relation to tenancies, we will also publish national guidance on the expected rights and responsibilities of every Gypsy Traveller site tenant. In addition, guidance on unauthorised sites will be published. As I have previously stated, I am committed to consulting Gypsy Travellers on guidance and decisions that affect their lives, and their views will be integral to the development of the guidance on sites to which I have just referred.

In the longer term, we are looking at promoting good practice on planning to identify the best way of helping the Gypsy Traveller community make best use of its assets. As the committee will appreciate, the community is a diverse one with a range of needs. Improving attendance and attainment in Gypsy Traveller children is a key priority and to support that, the Scottish Government has reconvened the Scottish Traveller education review group to improve access to education. The group will develop and then promote guidance on the education of young people from Travelling families and support the development of local, inclusive approaches across Scotland that address some of the challenges faced. Draft guidance is expected to be ready for consultation by the end of 2015, with publication thereafter in early 2016.

We remain committed to finding innovative ways of tackling the barriers to improving the health of Gypsy Traveller communities. For example, more than 60 Gypsy Traveller families have now

benefited from the better breaks and take a break programmes, which provide short breaks for disabled children and young people with complex needs and their families. Both funds continue to be widely advertised, including through promotion via *Travellers' Times*, to encourage future funding applications from the Gypsy Traveller community in the hope of supporting many more Gypsy Traveller families in the future.

Of course, that is just a snippet of the activity that is going on, and I look forward to taking questions from the committee in due course. At this point, however, I want to indicate five areas in which action is going to be taken in the coming months. In April, we will publish progress on our own equality outcome for Gypsy Travellers—which is, of course, to reduce discrimination against them—as well as our planning guidance on sites for local authorities. In May, we will publish our guidance on the quality of sites and, as I highlighted earlier, the rights and responsibilities of tenants and occupants. In the summer, we will publish the overarching strategy that I have referred to, as well as a briefing for local elected members on the issue. Finally, as we have indicated, we will be running, perhaps in the autumn, a marketing campaign to improve awareness and understanding of the needs of the Gypsy Traveller community and to try to reduce the level of discrimination against such communities throughout Scotland.

We recognise that resolving the issues faced by Gypsy Travellers is a challenge, and our approach has been very much based on looking at qualitative as well as quantitative issues and on taking all the key stakeholders with us. After all, as people around the table know, the Gypsy Traveller community is not a homogeneous community, and we must ensure that we take all sections of the community—as well as other stakeholders—with us.

Solutions require a collaborative working approach between the range of partner agencies, which include national and local government, national health service boards, education authorities, third sector organisations and the community itself. Working with the committee, we are determined to do all that we can to reduce discrimination against the Gypsy Traveller community in Scotland—with the objective, of course, of eliminating such discrimination—and to ensure that Gypsy Travellers have equal and ongoing access to health, education, housing and all the other amenities and public services that we ourselves expect.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that update. We appreciate that you are working to a tight timescale this morning, so I will pass you

straight over to John Finnie, who will ask the first set of questions.

John Finnie: Good morning, cabinet secretary, and thank you for that update.

If I were a young Gypsy Traveller who had seen a street sweeper on his or her site for the first time ever the day before the minister appeared or who had seen the urgency with which, for the first time in many years, the utility blocks had been painted, with cables and windows painted over in beautiful white; if the school unit on the site was presently unoccupied; and if, as we have been told, representations for a safer route to school had been met with people saying, "There's no point, because there's no interest," why would I believe any of this? We are 15 years on and it has been the same thing again and again. Although I do not doubt your good faith and engagement, why would I believe any of it? It is just more words from remote officials.

Alex Neil: Obviously, I disagree with that point, John.

John Finnie: I am playing devil's advocate a little bit, but that is the genuine perception. You must engage directly with Gypsy Travellers on a one-to-one basis, and they have heard all this before.

Alex Neil: We are engaging with them. To be honest, it is not always the easiest of communities to engage with, because of its long-standing suspicion—which has lasted for decades and is very justified in many cases—of officialdom at all levels. In addition, we rely on the good will and good intentions of local authorities and others at local level. We can only set the national framework and the policy framework—whether in health, education, housing, planning or equalities—but we rely on others not just to stick to the letter of what we are trying to do, but to do it in the spirit of what we are trying to do.

I will be planning a series of discussions between now and the end of the year with the Gypsy Traveller community. My approach to this job, whether it involves Gypsy Travellers, tenants in local authority housing or anything else, is not to believe everything that I am told through official channels, but to go out and find out for myself what is happening on the ground. That is the best way of finding out whether all the stuff that we are doing, with the best of intentions, is having the impact that we hope. If it is not having the impact that we intended on the ground, we need to find out why not and sort it out.

John Finnie: For the avoidance of any doubt, I was not questioning your bona fides in seeking to address the issue; I was stating what is an understandable perception.

Alex Neil: Absolutely.

John Finnie: It is very helpful that you have used the terms "discrimination" and "disenfranchised", because that is how these people feel.

When you say that you engage directly with the Gypsy Traveller community, who do you mean by that? You are right to say that, just like any other community, it is very diverse.

Alex Neil: When I was Minister for Housing and Communities, Brian Adam MSP raised a particular issue about the Aberdeen situation. There were real problems in Aberdeen that were much more critical than anything that we are dealing with currently. I took responsibility for that. We formed a working group, which involved the Gypsy Traveller community as well as the police, housing bodies, various local authorities, Brian Adam and a number of other MSPs, to ensure that it had cross-party support. We worked with the community.

There are not a lot of formal representative groups in the Gypsy Traveller community, so my view is that we have to go and talk to the people on the ground and find out their views. As John Finnie says, sometimes they are reluctant to do that, for obvious reasons, which are largely historical, but also because they are still subject to discrimination and therefore are not sure who they can trust. We went out of our way during that exercise and, eventually, we ended up with a situation that was acceptable to everybody. The Gypsy Traveller community's need for sites was addressed and the wider community was satisfied that we had reached a better solution than the makeshift one that was previously in place, which had caused enormous irritation for the Gypsy Traveller community and others.

It is necessary to go and talk to people. The showpeople are a similar group. I have a meeting coming up with the showmen's people, which was initially instigated by Dick Lyle MSP—I think that that is happening in the next couple of weeks. I want to talk to people who are from those communities rather than the suits—the middle people between me and the community.

John Finnie: I want to ask about research. Is the Scottish Government pulling together research? I think you mentioned MECOPP. In my constituency, North Argyll Carers Centre does tremendous work, in conjunction with MECOPP, with the Gypsy Traveller community. We have also heard that the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly's economic and social committee called on British and Irish jurisdictions

"to consider a statutory obligation on all local authorities to coordinate traveller site provision."

There is movement between the component parts of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Can you comment on what is being done to pull some of that work together?

Alex Neil: First of all, a lot of research has been going on as part of the work being done by way of preparation for the overarching strategy that will be published in the summer, which involves people from the Gypsy Traveller community. It is obvious that before we develop a strategy, we need to do the basic research.

I will demonstrate the pan-Government work that is being done on that by asking each of the officials to give brief examples of the research and co-ordination work that is going on in their respective departments. David Thomson will start and he will be followed by Lesley Irving and William Fleming.

10:00

David Thomson (Scottish Government): Thank you, cabinet secretary. We have done research into hand-held records with NHS Health Scotland, which has shown some of the advantages of hand-held records but also the difficulties in delivering them both within the health service and within the Gypsy Traveller community.

As part of our work on the new general practitioner contract, which we hope to have in place by April 2017, we are looking at various new models of care and how they address the needs of certain communities, particularly in the context of the new integration authorities and how they meet the needs of the local community. We are working with GP practices on a number of different models to look at different issues in communities. For example, we have worked with the Conan Doyle practice in Edinburgh on some of the issues in its community, and we are in the early stages of working with a more rural community general practice that has a constituency of Gypsy Travellers. We hope to have a project in there soon. We are using various methods to inform our work.

Lesley Irving (Scottish Government): Thank you, cabinet secretary. Similar to the situation that David Thomson explained in relation to health, the equality portfolio is engaged in a range of initiatives that will add to the information and knowledge that we have about the communities involved. For the first time in a census, the 2011 census had a question about people's identity as Gypsy Travellers. Our statistical colleagues are continuing to process the information from that, and there has recently been a release of information about Gypsy Travellers in relation to employment, health and a number of other factors. That is on-going work that will continue to build the

evidence base, which is a commitment that we made to the committee some years ago.

This was not done by the Scottish Government directly, but the Equality and Human Rights Commission recently produced some research into site provision that identified good practice in three sites in Scotland and one in England, in Carlisle. The EHRC made some useful recommendations, but William Fleming will know more about that.

On the work that we do in developing the strategy, through our funding programme on the equalities side we fund a number of organisations, such as MECOPP, which has been mentioned, and Article 12, which works with young Gypsy Travellers in particular. I take the point that Mr Finnie made, which was about why a young Gypsy Traveller should believe anything that we say, but one of the ways in which we are trying to address that problem is to build a cohort of young Gypsy Travellers who have the capacity to engage, to be involved in consultations and to speak for their community and be the leaders of the future, which is certainly what we aspire to from the funding for that.

We are also funding the Friends of Romano Lav, which is a representative group for Roma people in Scotland that very much wants to engage with the Government on behalf of its community, but we realise that it has some way to go before it has the capacity to do that, so we have brought it on to the strategy development group so that it can learn from that experience. We are doing a range of things, both on the hard research side through statistical evidence gathering and analysis, and in our funding of organisations to enable them to work with the community directly and add to the evidence base in that way.

William Fleming (Scottish Government): The Gypsy Traveller site working group met four times last year and quite a large part of the meetings was taken up by receiving reports from various stakeholders. The group also sent out questionnaires to local authorities in an effort to get up-to-date data on numbers of sites and their condition. In addition, as officials we have made it a priority to go out and meet Gypsy Travellers in their sites—not just local authority sites, but private sites. I think that we have also paid a couple of visits to unauthorised sites. We are trying to get an understanding at first hand of the condition of sites and of individuals' experiences of those sites.

From that, we are learning just how varied that experience is and we are learning quite a bit about how good sites can be developed, often privately, in places such as South Lanarkshire. We are also learning about the experience in Falkirk where,

over quite a lengthy period, the community was brought around to understanding how a site could be integrated and made acceptable. We have been examining that through some academic research that was carried out by the University of Salford, and we are trying to draw out the lessons that might be applied in other areas. Again, we are using the working group to acquire a better understanding in the abstract and, as far as we can, from first-hand experience. Like the minister, we are trying to get out there and understand the nature of the problems from what we see.

John Mason: When you wrote to the convener in January, you talked about a forthcoming briefing for elected members—local councillors, I think. Could you tell us more about that? Is the problem that local councillors do not understand what their responsibilities are, or is it that, in some cases, they are under so much pressure from vocal groups in the settled community that they find it difficult to produce sites?

Alex Neil: The problem varies from place to place. When I was Minister for Housing and Communities five or six years ago, there was no doubt in my mind that councillors in Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council were under enormous pressure with regard to the unofficial sites in their areas. If I recall correctly, the seafront in Aberdeen was one of the more controversial unofficial sites being used by Gypsy Travellers, and enormous problems had been caused with the local community. In fact, that was one of the reasons why Brian Adam approached me to see what action we could take.

To be honest, I think that, sometimes, the attitude of local councillors is not always as enlightened as it could and should be and that we have some educational work to do in some areas. These are human beings, and they have the same human rights as the rest of us. Indeed, one of the wider areas of work that I am taking forward in relation to Gypsy Travellers involves the Scottish national action plan on human rights—or SNAP. The other day, I had a meeting with the chair of the Scottish Human Rights Commission, Professor Alan Miller, and I am setting up a cross-Government group to consider the progress that we are making on SNAP. Obviously, improving the delivery of human rights, in their various guises, for the Gypsy Traveller community is part of the action plan, and it is another tool that we, along with the commission, will use to measure progress on how much we are achieving on the ground as a result of all the initiatives that are going on.

John Mason: I take the point that you make in your letter that decisions are usually best made at a local level, with local knowledge and local accountability. However, the reality is that we have not seen any progress. We are dealing with a

national issue, are we not? One of the things about Gypsy Travellers is that they are attached to not just one but a number of areas.

You have talked about guidance, but I do not know how strong that is. Do you feel that there is a need for some kind of lead or pressure from the centre to ensure that local authorities make something happen?

Alex Neil: I would not say that we have not made progress. I think that we have done so, as David Thomson suggested in relation to access to GP facilities. Further progress has been made in aspects of housing and various other things, but that progress is variable across the country—there is no doubt about that—and, overall, it has not been as fast or as great as I would have liked. In the strategic work that is going on, which involves members of the Gypsy Traveller community, we are asking what we need to do in the strategy to ensure that more progress is made—and made in a way that is much less variable and less of a postcode lottery than is the case at the moment.

Obviously, not every local authority has a Gypsy Traveller community. They tend to be confined to a number of local authorities, and we are working with those ones in particular. I have already mentioned the Aberdeen and Grampian area, and Falkirk is another area that has a bit of a concentration of Gypsy Travellers. We need to work in particular with local authorities in whose areas there is a permanent Gypsy Traveller presence, because in certain local authorities there is very little Gypsy Traveller presence or none whatsoever.

John Mason: I accept that there are signs of progress. For example, when we were up in Aberdeenshire, we very much got the impression that there was a good relationship with the isolated primary school or the isolated GP practice. However, such good relationships were far from common. In fact, Gypsy Travellers often went where they knew that a school, unlike the majority of schools, or a general practice had a good relationship with them.

I will not read out the whole quote, but in its submission, MECOPP quotes a Gypsy Traveller as saying:

“Surely by now the Government has enough evidence about what needs to be done, can’t they just get it done instead of endlessly talking, only then will Gypsy/Travellers like me start to take it seriously”.

My fear is that, although we have made a lot of effort to engage as a committee, a time comes when people start to shut off, because they simply feel that no progress is being made.

Alex Neil: I have no doubt that there is an element of that and that there is an element of frustration, but it is clear that there are members of

the Gypsy Traveller community who recognise that progress has been made. The people involved in the strategic working group, for example, are not wasting their time; they are there because they believe that it will make a difference. However, I accept that there is a lot of frustration that things are not happening more quickly and more universally, and we share that frustration.

If the strategy says that we need to take a more dirigiste approach, I am prepared to do that if that is what is required. However, how we do that must be informed by the strategy, because the whole point of it is that it involves stakeholders, particularly the Gypsy Traveller community.

Jayne Baxter: When in 2013 the committee published its report on where Gypsy Travellers live, there were real concerns about the quality and condition of sites. Earlier, William Fleming referred to work that is going on, but what is being done to address those poor conditions? What will the Scottish Government do if councils are not complying? Will it monitor the outcomes? Will there be sanctions?

Alex Neil: As I have said, in May we will publish guidance on the quality of the sites and the rights and responsibilities of site owners and occupants.

Perhaps I can draw a parallel with social housing more generally. As you will know, we have the Scottish housing quality standard, which we use to monitor the progress of social landlords—both councils and housing associations—on the quality of housing that they provide. I am equating that with the guidance that we will publish in May. I expect that to have exactly the same standing as the Scottish housing quality standard, because it is very clear that the objective of every social landlord in Scotland is to meet that standard. Indeed, every investment plan that we approve in every local authority area for housing and every investment plan by every housing association has at its core the need to bring all housing stock up to the Scottish housing quality standard by a certain period. We do not provide funding if the plan does not have that. I want to see that kind of vigorous system applied to the quality of sites for Gypsy Travellers.

Jayne Baxter: What if it is not?

Alex Neil: If it is not, we will need to look at what we need to do to get it sorted. At the end of the day, there is the possibility of sanctioning the local authority or saying that it will not get grant funding for various things if it does not raise the standard.

There is a starting point that I always have if local authorities are failing, as some are. Generally speaking, local authorities are much further behind the housing associations in respect of the Scottish housing quality standard, and my initial approach

has always been to use dialogue to get the local authority sector to improve its performance. That very often works, particularly with specific local authorities. What works most effectively is saying, "Look, if you don't improve, don't bother coming to us for grant funding for more council housing. Why would we throw good money after bad?" Very often, the cash speaks the loudest in dealing with local authorities.

10:15

Jayne Baxter: So you are taking a carrot-and-stick approach.

Let me change the subject slightly. I am interested in the implementation of the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014, particularly with regard to getting it right for every child and the named person provisions, which are a bit controversial at the moment. How will all of that apply to the Gypsy Traveller community?

Alex Neil: A lot of utter rubbish has been written in the press about the named person concept. I think that it is particularly applicable to the Gypsy Traveller community because, by definition, they are travelling people. One of the problems that we have in ensuring that they have proper access to health, education and any housing services that they want is that they are often travelling from one local authority area to another. That makes things difficult, and there are particular challenges in implementing the named person legislation in the Gypsy Traveller community. However, we must face and find solutions to those challenges, and we are working with our education colleagues on that.

Jayne Baxter: Thank you.

Sandra White: Picking up on David Thomson's reply to John Finnie about the NHS and working with the Gypsy Traveller community, I have to say that I am particularly interested in work with carers. You mentioned respite care for people with disabilities. How are you going to speak to the NHS boards and get them to come together with the Gypsy Travellers to ensure that they have the same rights as anyone else with regard to care facilities?

David Thomson: As we have made very clear in our approach, Gypsy Travellers should have the same rights as anyone else.

Through the strategy development group and as part of the development work, we have had presentations from a number of NHS boards on their approaches. We have heard from NHS Health Scotland, NHS Grampian and NHS Fife, each of which has taken a different approach. NHS Health Scotland carried out the research and produced some conclusions for the strategy, while

NHS Grampian told us about the work that is being done at the Clinterty halting site, which I think the committee visited. It is fair to say that Gypsy Travellers are travelling to that place to get medical services.

NHS Fife gave us an interesting example of the needs assessment that it undertook in 2013 of Gypsy Travellers in the community. It has resulted in a specific plan with, for example, the sharing of information among health and social care staff; NHS Fife working with NHS 24 and the Scottish Ambulance Service to support the community; and named leads for education, health visiting and other things. The strategy development group could learn from that work.

Another good example is the new 111 number for NHS 24. Over the past six months, NHS 24 has taken specific steps to work with the Gypsy Traveller community on promoting the use of the 111 number among Gypsy Travellers. There are all sorts of initiatives, and the key is to learn from them in developing the strategy.

Alex Neil: I will mention another example. When I was health secretary, we took the decision that everybody in Scotland should have an electronic patient record by 2020, if not earlier. One of the benefits of such a record will be that Travelling people will have their own records, which means that even if they travel from health board area to health board area, staff in a general practice or an accident and emergency department will be able to access their medical history immediately—provided, of course, that they have the patient's authorisation to do so, which one assumes will be the case in the circumstances. The electronic patient record will be another tool that will help us very much. I am particularly concerned about youngsters getting inoculations and all the rest of it, and the electronic patient record will capture all such things and ensure that NHS staff will be able to establish very quickly the patient's medical history, which will help with their treatment.

The other thing that David Thomson mentioned and which should not be underestimated is the opportunity afforded by the negotiations on the new GP contract, which must be completed by April 2017. As you know, the GP system currently operates on the basis of a panel of patients; if you are not on a panel, it can be very difficult to get treated. That is another particularly difficult issue for Travelling people, who by definition travel from one area to another. Even if they stay within the same local authority or health board area, things can be made difficult if they travel between different GP catchment areas, and very often they do not bother registering with a GP in the first place. One thing that the Government wants to achieve with the GP contract negotiations is a

system that makes it much easier for Travelling people to access primary care services, without necessarily having to be registered with one general practice. That is to be negotiated, but we have an opportunity to improve the service—and we should not underestimate the importance of such an opportunity.

Sandra White: Cabinet secretary, you have just pre-empted my question about hand-held records. We have had evidence that health boards are saying that hand-held records are a problem, but Gypsy Travellers are saying that that is just an excuse. I assume, then, that the electronic record will be a great improvement.

Alex Neil: Absolutely. Hand-held records are a problem for everybody, not just Gypsy Travellers. As you know, I represent a constituency in Lanarkshire, and I will tell the committee about one of the problems that I have in dealing with complaints against the NHS. If someone is being treated at two hospitals—say, Hairmyres and Monklands—they can find when they attend Hairmyres that their notes are at Monklands and have not been transferred for the appointment. If someone goes to the Beatson cancer centre in Glasgow for an appointment, their notes might not be transferred from Monklands, because the patient is still being hosted at Monklands.

The problem of hand-held records is not unique to the Gypsy Traveller community; they are a problem for everybody. That is why the introduction of the electronic patient record is so important and could be so beneficial to everybody, particularly the Gypsy Traveller community.

Christian Allard: When last week I spoke directly to the Gypsy Traveller community in Clinterty, the important message that I was given was that local authorities, the Scottish Government and this committee, to some extent, have failed. We might have made progress on people's understanding of the Gypsy Traveller community a lot, but we are not making progress at all on practicability. The very strong message was that local authorities, the Government and we have failed at creating new sites. Is it not time to empower communities to have their own sites? I was quite happy to see your letter, which explains how good practice on planning applications for Gypsy Traveller sites will be promoted. We know about the St Cyrus site, which was created without planning permission, although I think that backdated planning permission will be asked for. Given the importance of this issue, what direction should we take to empower communities to have their own sites?

Alex Neil: Obviously new sites need to be subject to some kind of overall planning mechanism, because people cannot just set up a site any more than they can go and willy-nilly build

a house anywhere. There must be some kind of management control at local authority level over land use, planning and all the rest of it.

That said, I could decide what site I want to build a house on and then apply for planning permission, and I do not see why we should not have a parallel, similar system for people in the Gypsy Traveller community who identify an area for the creation of a permanent site. Again, though, that would have to be subject to approval by the local authority. We cannot have anarchy reign in any of this; people cannot just decide to build houses or establish sites wherever they like, without any planning or building control or whatever. Subject to that qualification, people should be able to identify areas where they want to build sites and then apply for the appropriate planning permission, building warrant or whatever permission is required.

Christian Allard: Could we earmark sites for community buyouts?

Alex Neil: Again, I do not see why not, provided that such proposals are subject to the normal procedures that would apply to a community buyout today. The whole point is that they must be subject to those procedures. We cannot have people doing this willy-nilly, without going through proper procedures, because you have to look at the wider picture. In principle, however, I do not see why what you have suggested cannot happen.

Christian Allard: I would love you to come and meet some of the Gypsy Travellers there.

Alex Neil: We will fix up a time, Christian. We will do that the next time I am in the Aberdeen area.

Christian Allard: What can you do to reduce discrimination against Gypsy Travellers? You said that you were going to have a campaign, maybe in the autumn, but are you thinking about doing some work during the summer? Are you thinking about having a big event? A campaign could be seen as just another campaign. How can we make a big difference in this matter?

Alex Neil: I mentioned the marketing campaign, because it is the first time that that sort of thing has been done. You asked earlier about research. Before we decide what shape the campaign will take, we are carrying out a lot of market research on the most effective kind of campaign to run, the tone of the campaign, whom it should be aimed at and whether we should use social media rather than television advertising or press media. There are loads of questions and just now we are doing market research to help us put the campaign together.

This is such a sensitive issue, and we need to get it right. I do not want to end up with something

that is counterproductive because we have not done proper research and preparation. Instead, I want to end up with a marketing campaign that is effective and targeted at the right people.

Christian Allard: You reckon that it has to be a positive campaign.

Alex Neil: Yes, absolutely.

Sandra White: How will direct support payments fit in? I know that we do not have much time, convener, so could we write to the cabinet secretary for an update on that? How will such support work with the coming together of health and social care?

Alex Neil: Do you mean self-directed support, Sandra?

Sandra White: Yes.

Alex Neil: I am sure that David Thomson will give you a comprehensive reply on that. I do not know whether we have the statistics, but it might be useful to identify how many members of the Gypsy Traveller community are already on self-directed support.

The Convener: I thank the cabinet secretary and his officials for coming along and giving us that information. We will take up your offer and, I am sure, write to you with other questions.

That concludes the public part of today's meeting. Our next meeting will take place on Thursday 5 March.

10:27

Meeting continued in private until 11:03.

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