WHERE GYPSY/TRAVELLERS LIVE/GYPSY/TRAVELLERS AND CARE

CORRESPONDENCE FROM COSLA

I refer to the Equal Opportunities Committee’s recent inquiry into “Where Gypsy/Traveller Live” and “Gypsy Travellers and Care”, and also the transcript of the Chamber debate in Parliament on 5 September 2013.

As you will be aware, COSLA is a membership organisation representing all Scottish local authorities. Our membership decides on areas of work and priorities and what resources are attached to any work area. Furthermore, as a membership organisation, our role is to represent local authorities and, while we can highlight issues raised by the Parliament and other bodies, we are not in a position to instruct our member councils on matters of policy. I must also be clear, and as I’m sure you will appreciate, it is simply not possible for COSLA to respond fully to every report produced by Parliament.

Notwithstanding the above, I do understand the strength of feeling expressed in your Committee’s reports and have consulted with our members on the reports and the recommendations as they relate to Local Government. Particularly, we asked our members to provide us with positive examples of their interaction with the Gypsy/Traveller community, in order to demonstrate the role of Local Government in supporting positive outcomes.

Where Gypsy/Travellers Live
Our member councils have indicated to us that when they become aware of new travellers in their area they visit sites to assess education, housing and health needs. This work is undertaken by professional staff who will always aspire to do this sensitively, with due regard given to the traditions and interests of the community.

When new sites are proposed however, you will be aware that there are often campaigns by local residents and businesses against such developments. As democratic institutions, this can sometimes place councils in a difficult position. Nonetheless, we would accept that there is an issue here and welcome the Scottish Government’s proposals for an awareness raising campaign around the contribution made by Gypsy/Travellers to our communities.

Planning provision for sites is based on local housing strategies, which are informed by evidence taken from local Housing Needs and Demand Assessments (HNDA). A local housing strategy provides the strategic direction on tackling housing need and informs the future investment in housing and related services areas. This need and demand is then reflected in local development plans. COSLA is aware that HNDAs and local housing strategy guidance is currently being updated. It is COSLA’s expectation that this update will give due consideration to the Gypsy/Traveller community as part of the local housing strategy process.

As you will know COSLA does not have any mandate to comment on the specifics of any particular local authority’s planning policies or to interfere in local democratic decision making of a particular council.

Education
Local authorities do provide support to gain enrolment in school or help to gain access to educational resources to support the pupil within their home site. We acknowledge there are problems around transition from primary to secondary schools, with low numbers of Gypsy/Traveller children in secondary education. Some families cite exposure to drugs, sex education and bullying as reasons for not attending. But there is also a tradition of children starting work with their families around this transition age, and families remove their children from education, often by registering to home educate.

Local authorities do have strategies to encourage attendance and support transitions. Examples include having specialist staff in place and providing transport to and from sites to schools. Extra staff will be drafted into schools if there is a sudden increase in schools numbers, as can be the case. Induction sessions for secondary schools are offered with visits to schools. A number of
local authorities provide teaching facilities on site with teachers and ICT provided, which allows pupils to continue with their education into the secondary stage. Anti-bullying strategies are also in place. I would assure you that councils are aware of their responsibilities and are serious about providing support to gypsy/traveller pupils.

Care
In relation to local authorities’ social care responsibilities, the report highlights problems obtaining aids and adaptations and raises issues around the portability of care. We recognise both of these matters. On aids and adaptations, we will take note of the report on this and enter into dialogue with the Joint Improvement Team in particular, to encourage them to raise these issues, as required, when engaging with councils on the subject of aids and adaptations.

In addition, COSLA is involved in ongoing work to improve the consistency of local authority charging policies across Scotland. This should contribute to improved outcomes for portability of care; the aspiration being to achieve a more consistent experience from the user perspective. As you can appreciate, however, the structure of the legal framework around social work assessment ties that back to a single local authority, so councils are currently having to operate within a legal framework that constrains portability of care.

Conclusion
We note the work of the Equal Opportunities Committee in relation to Gypsy/Travellers and their findings following a series of site visits. The committee has engaged extensively with this community and the two reports produced contain important recommendations. We have profiled these recommendations with four of COSLA’s Executive Groups, and have provided within this letter some good examples of how local authorities are already responding to these issues. We are happy to work with Scottish Government and other partners on this wider agenda.

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