

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Tuesday 23 May 2000
(*Afternoon*)

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CONVENER

*Kate MacLean (Dundee West) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Malcolm Chisholm (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab)

*Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab)

*Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab)

*Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

Irene McGugan (North-East Scotland) (SNP)

*Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab)

Tricia Marwick (Mid Scotland and Fife) (SNP)

*Mr John Munro (Ross, Skye and Inverness West) (LD)

*Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD)

Tommy Sheridan (Glasgow) (SSP)

Elaine Smith (Coatbridge and Chryston) (Lab)

*attended

WITNESSES

Michelle Lloyd (Save the Children)

Mark Kennedy (Scottish Gypsy Travellers Association)

Cathy McInnes (Scottish Gypsy Travellers Association)

Janet McPhee (Scottish Gypsy Travellers Association)

ACTING CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Simon Watkins

ASSISTANT CLERK

Alison Campbell

LOCATION

Festival Theatre

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Tuesday 23 May 2000

(Afternoon)

[THE CONVENER *opened the meeting at 13:20*]

Scottish Travellers

The Convener (Kate MacLean): Welcome to this afternoon's meeting of the Equal Opportunities Committee. Instead of Rachel Hilton from the Scottish Gypsy Travellers Association, Michelle Lloyd from Save the Children is here and will read out Rachel's statement. Do you all want to make brief statements, or have you decided to have one spokesperson?

Michelle Lloyd (Save the Children): We will make four brief statements.

The Convener: Okay. We will start with Cathy McInnes, if that is all right.

Mark Kennedy (Scottish Gypsy Travellers Association): It would be easier if Janet McPhee spoke first and we spoke in the order that we had set out.

The Convener: That is fine. What is your order?

Mark Kennedy: It is Janet, Michelle, Cathy and then me.

The Convener: I forgot to take item 1 on the agenda, which is that item 3 will be taken in private if we agree to do so. Are we agreed?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Janet, would you like to start off?

Janet McPhee (Scottish Gypsy Travellers Association): I am a bit nervous, because to me this is like a court and I have never been to a court before.

Good afternoon. I am Janet McPhee, and I am here today on behalf of Heatherwood community association. All the members of our group live on the Heatherwood site, which is in Kirkcaldy and is owned by Fife Council. The site has 18 pitches and is full at present. More than 30 children and young people live there.

We set up our association in November last year for two main reasons. First, we want to give the children and young people on our site more opportunities. Secondly, we want to make sure that the views of Travellers are heard. Our group

is very active and a lot has happened in a short time. We have a Portakabin on the site, which we use on a daily basis for all kinds of community activities and services. A youth club is provided for children and young people of all ages. Teachers come twice a week for the teenagers, a midwife comes once a week and a health visitor comes once a month. Most weeks we run a Sunday school for the young ones. We have also used the Portakabin for first aid classes. We have plans for the future, too. In the autumn, family literacy classes and a computer course will start, along with a parent and toddler group.

If we had a permanent building we could do a lot more, and we are working towards that. Our site is the only one in Scotland with a training scheme for young people. Most of the young Travellers who are involved with the project live on a local authority site in Fife, and either have little experience of formal education or ceased schooling at the end of primary school. The reason is discrimination. They have been moved on from their encampments, which resulted in breaks in their education. It is difficult to acquire schooling when you do not know where you will be allowed to stop next, or for how long.

There is also the issue of negative experiences when at school, such as name calling and bullying. That is reflected in parents' views on the uptake of education, particularly secondary education. As Gypsy Traveller culture is based on self-enterprise and self-employment, most of the students have learned basic building skills from their fathers and the elders in their community, but there are no ways of formalising those skills. As parents, we recognise the need for that in today's society, so that our children are better able to compete in the employment field.

Most of the training that is available now is structured around the needs of settled communities and is not appropriate for our culture. Given that the media coverage that we receive is negative, particularly with regard to our work practices, we need to challenge such discrimination and ensure that our children and future generations benefit and can have the same opportunities that everyone else has, in a much fairer society.

At present, seven students have been attending the general buildings operatives course as an introduction to Scottish vocational qualifications. The project has been running since August and covers a wide range of skills. The students have completed their assessments and are doing well. The training providers are Fife Council economic development service and the vocational training unit in partnership with the Scottish Gypsy Travellers Association. Extra support is provided by Fife Council education department. The project

is funded by Scottish Enterprise's new futures fund.

A flexible approach to work has meant that access to training has been a positive experience for us. We already have youngsters asking for a place on the course when they are old enough. In addition, fathers have asked for training and have completed a course and received health and safety certificates. They will also undergo further training next month so that we are up to speed on the new rules that are to be introduced to the building trade regarding registration certificates, bookkeeping and Inland Revenue returns. While most of the work experience is undertaken at the Heatherywood site, in the autumn we hope to start training at the Tarvit Mill site in north-east Fife. That will help to encourage other youngsters to link into the project.

Travellers from our association have started to attend a liaison group, organised by Fife Council, which discusses issues that affect Travellers. We try to make sure that Travellers' voices are heard at all levels in Fife and in Scotland. Although we have tried to make things better for everyone who lives on our site, there are still problems. Rent on the site is much higher than it is for council houses. We pay £50 a week, while those in houses pay only £30 a week. For that money, we get a pitch that has just enough room for two caravans and an amenity unit, which is small and basic. The bathroom is off the kitchen area, which is unhygienic and would not be allowed in a house. The units are cold and have few power points. We had hoped that the new site in Fife at Kelty would have better facilities but, even if the site goes ahead, the council has told us that there is not enough money for improvement.

Electricity costs on site are high. The charges for electricity supplies vary from site to site. Some charge at business tariff rates, others at domestic rates and the rest have different arrangements. On most sites, Scottish Power plc does not send out individual accounts. Instead, meter systems are used. The kind of meters that are used varies. While some sites have Scottish Power card meters, many have meters that require a card bought from the site manager. There are still some sites where people never get to read their meter or to see a bill—each week, the manager simply tells them what they owe and they have to pay it. At present, we buy power cards from the manager of our site. At Tarvit Mill and other sites in Fife, everyone is billed individually by Scottish Power. Fife Council is examining the situation. We would like people to be treated as individuals who can make their own arrangements with Scottish Power or whoever supplies the electricity.

We still face discrimination and sometimes cannot register with doctors or get services from

shops that others take for granted. We face major problems in getting credit on deliveries when companies find out that we live on a travelling persons' site. We are working with other agencies to get our address and postcode changed by the council. It is not that we mind personally—we do not, as we are proud to be Travellers. However, sometimes that is the only way in which we can obtain catalogues or deliveries, or get taxis to call. People on other sites have had to take similar action.

We still travel in the summer months, but our way of life is under threat. It is getting harder and harder to find a place to stop. We cannot get on to many touring caravan sites. The committee has been told about the situation with transit sites and the fact that at the moment we have to spend more time on the site. There are 25 people on the waiting list for our site. The new site at Kelty will have 12 pitches. We all have families—I have four children—and we want to ensure that they have somewhere to go when they want a place of their own. All we want is the right to live a nomadic life and to be recognised as an authentic group. We have been here for as long as time. We want the Government and people to accept us the way we are, and to respect our right to roam.

The Convener: Thank you. We will hear opening statements from our other witnesses before taking questions. The next witness is Michelle Lloyd, speaking on behalf of Rachel Hilton, who is unable to attend.

Michelle Lloyd: I will simply read out the speech that Rachel has prepared.

The Convener: That is fine.

13:30

Michelle Lloyd: This is what Rachel said.

In Scotland today, Gypsies and Travellers meet their accommodation needs in a range of ways. Some live on caravan sites, which may be owned by local authorities, by private individuals or by companies. Some live on roadside camps on areas of waste ground, industrial estates and so on. Others live in housing, which may be owner occupied, council owned or privately rented. It is not uncommon for Traveller families to change their accommodation frequently; there is often a two-way flow between different types of sites and houses, influenced by a number of push-and-pull factors. Push factors may include a lack of facilities, insecurity on roadside camps, forced eviction or harsh weather conditions. Pull factors may include access to water and electricity, the chance to enrol children at school, or access to medical facilities. The common assumption that housed Travellers are all permanently settled is incorrect. There is much more to being a Traveller

than merely travelling; just because someone is in a house, they do not stop being a Traveller.

Throughout history, Travellers have been viewed as a "problem" that requires a "solution". In Scotland sites have been put forward as the "solution", but there are many problems with them. For example, most sites have insecure tenancies, so there is no right to buy, and the tenants have far fewer sites than those in council housing. Another problem is the location of council sites—they are often near tips or canals, or surrounded by electricity pylons. There are many unnecessary rules and regulations, such as the application forms that ask people for information about their tax disc, for their national insurance number, or for personal information about their family. The sites currently run by North Lanarkshire Council are a good example of unnecessary rules and regulations; Cathy McInnes will speak about those later.

Some Travellers feel that site wardens or managers try to manage the people and families living on the sites, rather than the accommodation. Allocation policies are neither open nor accountable, and there is a limited right of appeal for people if they are turned down. The conditions on many council sites fall far below the level that we would now expect for housing. Some sites in Scotland still do not have heating in the facility units. Some caravan sites also impose a one-caravan-per-pitch rule. Many Traveller families both want and need two caravans to accommodate a mixed family. As Janet McPhee has just said, rent levels and electricity charges are high, and many sites do not have communal facilities or play areas.

To settled society, the right to a roof over one's head is considered fundamental and enshrined in various laws. For Travellers, a place to stop or stay is just as crucial. Over the past century, Travellers have faced increasing pressure from central Government and local government—and the general public—to abandon their traditional nomadic way of life and to settle down on purpose-built sites or in housing. There has been little attempt to research or address seriously the accommodation needs and desires of Traveller families in Scotland.

That runs contrary to what has been happening in wider Scottish society, where there have been numerous surveys—household growth surveys, consultation papers and so on. The Scottish Executive's recent housing green paper promoted a debate about new approaches to public sector housing—in particular, community ownership schemes. A similar debate should be encouraged in relation to the accommodation needs of Travellers. For too long, the needs of Travellers have been ignored. We propose that a small

working group is set up with the specific aim of developing alternative ways of meeting Travellers' accommodation needs. Like any other community, we have varied needs and we need varied responses, rather than the uniform and unsuitable approach that has been taken to date.

That is the speech by Rachel Hilton.

The Convener: Thank you very much.

Cathy McInnes (Scottish Gypsy Travellers Association): I would like to speak about the current conditions of some of our sites in Scotland. In particular, I would like to speak about Double Dykes site, which was raided recently. That raid was carried out in a barbaric way. Twenty families were made to get out of their caravans at eight o'clock in the morning by Department of Social Security officials, council workers and the police, who were present in force. People who were in their beds were made to come out. A senile old lady of 90, who has forgotten her name—although if someone asked her what happened in the war, she could tell them—was made to stand outside. When her grandson came to her rescue, he was nearly arrested. A mistake had been made with her widow's pension—her husband had died in the war—but the problem could have been sorted out earlier.

Other people who were sleeping had the covers pulled off them so that the police could see who they were. Cupboards were looked into and mothers with children were forced to let the police look under their beds. That is quite ridiculous in this day and age. Can the committee imagine the distress that was caused to those children by having the police at their door? People are told that their children should not be frightened, and that if there is a problem they should go to the police. How can we tell our children to go to the police when we see them behaving like that?

An old woman whose doctor had told her not to stand for three months, because she had had a hip operation, was told to come outside. When she refused, the police were brought to her door and she was verbally abused. When her husband tried to protect his wife, he was told that he was going to be arrested. The lady receives benefit because she is not fit to work, but that is all. The people in all 20 caravans were bullied by the police and the local authority. Nobody told them who they were or showed them a warrant. We tried on various occasions to find out why this happened, but our requests for information were denied. Eventually we were told that the aim of the raid was to find out whether people were getting their proper benefits. My goodness, there are better ways of doing that than attacking people with force at eight o'clock in the morning.

The other site that I would like to talk about is

Plains. My family and I have been trying to get on to that site for five years. Six families came to me yesterday to tell me that they have nowhere to go: the caravan sites are full and they want to get on to the Plains site. However, all our attempts to get on to the site have been blocked. Nobody has given us a reason for the refusal. Every time we try, different rules and regulations are read out to us; the rules are changed for every Traveller. We are told that the site only takes families who are on the social. My family is not on the social. Does that mean that we have to stop working and live off state benefit to get on to the site that the Scottish Parliament paid to be built for us?

Conditions are appalling. The site in Dundee that I work on has never been heated. The council built stone chalets in the coldest part of Scotland and has never installed any heating. When I went up in the winter—and there are old people and children on that site—water was coming down the electric light fittings and dripping off the bulbs. That leaking is dangerous and I have fought for months and months to try to get it sorted. I was sent a letter recently telling me that work would be done on the site, but most of it will be to the warden's office. She does not live there; she is there only for five minutes every day. Why should her office be done up? She has a lovely warm house to go home to.

The people who stay there have to live in those conditions and bathe there. They have to cook in the same area as the lavvy—the toilet—and it is unbelievable that the money was spent on the warden's office. Did people think that we wanted to eat in the same room as the toilets? We are very clean; we eat in our kitchens or dining rooms, but they put our wash hand basins and our sinks all together. That means that we have to cook where the toilet is.

I do not think that anybody realised that we are people when they built the sites; they built them without thinking, just to keep the public happy. Nobody thought that they were building sites for people, not animals, to live on. We are people and we have to live our lives. We have been here for centuries and have a right to live a normal life, just as you have. If we pull into a touring site and say, "We're here for the night. Can we stay?" we are not allowed to. We have to find out before we leave whether there is a site that we can go to. We are not allowed to travel freely in this country.

The rest of my information is in the written report, so there is no point in me going on and boring you too much, but I am concerned about the safety of the people on the sites. What is going to become of us? Why are we being attacked? Why are we not allowed to live freely? Our families went to war and fought for this country, so we should have the same rights as everybody else to

wander through it.

Mark Kennedy: I will not read my submission to you, because you have got it in front of you. I suggest that you read it. Your ears will be sore after getting bombarded by evidence from the three witnesses that you have already heard.

As bullet point 6 in my submission says, Save the Children and the law department of the University of Dundee have written a report called "Moving Targets", which describes institutionalised racism. As vice chairman of the Scottish Gypsy Travellers Association, I invite the committee to put as much effort into trying to solve our problem as you are putting into repealing section 28. I also invite you to come round some of the sites.

The people responsible for the North Lanarkshire site would, under any other circumstances, have been hauled into a court of law for the misappropriation of money. They were given money by central Government to provide a site for Travellers. They decided to impose such draconian measures that it would be impossible for anyone to fulfil the criteria for getting on to that site. We have written to them, asked them and spoken to them, and they just keep moving the goalposts.

The SGTA and many other organisations seem to be shouting for no reason, because North Lanarkshire Council is refusing to listen to anybody. However, that is not the only council that has a problem. I have been to two major council meetings in Edinburgh. When I was invited to the first one, the chairman of the group spent half an hour with me before the meeting to prepare me for the language that was about to be used in the meeting room. If the people there were talking about any other group, they would not have got away with the language that I heard when I got into that room, but I had to sit there and listen to it. The subsequent meeting, three weeks later, was exactly the same.

That happens constantly. We are here because we feel that there is an opportunity to improve the situation, particularly in this city, which opens its doors every August to people from all over the world and celebrates all different cultures. However, there is another culture within the city's bounds and there is one site in Edinburgh. People have been arguing over a second site for more than 30 years.

I am sure that some of you will be aware of the Advisory Committee on Scotland's Travelling People, which seems to be made up of the good and the great. Personally, I can see no use for a committee that uses words such as "toleration" and "transient". If such words were used in relation to any other group, they would be recognised as offensive. However, it seems that when such

language is directed towards Travellers, people think that it is acceptable. We would ask people to think about the language that they use. I am not asking MSPs to be politically correct, I am simply asking that the Parliament allow us the same dignity that it grants other people.

We all have children—they are no thieves and they are no liars. We raise them to be God-fearing children, with a sense of right and wrong. Even so, police officers can come along and drag our children out of their beds at seven o'clock in the morning—they even drag old women out of their beds. There is historical evidence to suggest that the police think that that is how Travellers should be dealt with. Things have got worse in the past 30 years. When I was a child, we camped on the Duke of Roxburgh's estate and we were welcome there, as on many other sites. However, as the years have passed, we have become less and less welcome. I have heard very few MPs stand up and say that that is wrong.

The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 specifically criminalises us. Again, no one stood up and said that that was wrong and that our culture had a right to exist. Given that this is the Equal Opportunities Committee, I invite members to come and talk to us personally. This is not really the appropriate forum, because we are discussing a particular issue and we are cap in hand. We invite committee members to come and speak to us, to see that we are not demons, thieves, liars, tax dodgers or benefit fraudsters.

There are Travellers in the city of Edinburgh who are major employers, but who will not put their heads above the parapet for fear of the cost to their businesses. I invite the committee to meet the SGTA or Travellers in any other part of Scotland to see what is going on and to read the documentation. We are not considered worthy enough for inclusion in the Macpherson report—someone else makes the decisions for us.

13:45

The Convener: I realise that this is not the best forum for you to give evidence in. If someone is not used to speaking at such meetings, it can be a bit intimidating. Once the committee has had a discussion, we might want to take up your offer of coming out for a visit. I am sure that we would get much more out of that. If you do not mind, I will open the meeting out for questions from committee members. We received the papers only this morning but, after members have had a chance to read them properly, they might get back in touch with further questions.

Mr Michael McMahon (Hamilton North and Bellshill) (Lab): The problem seems to be that local authorities make the rules about the sites. Do

local authorities make those rules in consultation with you? Do you have regular contact to discuss the problems that you face or is there no dialogue between Travellers and the local authorities?

Mark Kennedy: Dialogue is a good word; the local authority tells us what it is going to do and we have no right of appeal. The system operates on the basis that others know best. One of the issues that we discussed earlier was that of the sheds. To pay £50 a week for a shed is ridiculous. I would like the committee to come and look at those sheds and to consider them in the context of planning permission—under any other circumstances, those sheds would have been pulled down. However, such buildings seem to be okay for us, because the council has already negotiated with someone, although I have no idea who that someone might be. Local authorities certainly do not speak to the Travellers who live on those sites or who are on the side of the road looking for somewhere to go. They contact us only so that they can tell us what they are going to do solve their problem.

Mr McMahon: Were you represented on the advisory committee on Travellers that has been established? I know that a report is being produced. What input did you have into that report?

Mark Kennedy: We had no input. The advisory committee did some excellent work 30 years ago when it was set up. However, as with most committees, it has lost its shine after 30 years. The SGTA view is that any advisory committee does not inspire confidence if it is loaded up with about three Travellers and about 20 other people who use words like "toleration" and "transit".

From my point of view, and from that of the Travellers to whom I have spoken—as an organisation, the SGTA has spoken to many Travellers throughout Scotland—we are dreading that report and the fact that the Executive will take it on board without speaking to other agencies, such as the University of Dundee. That is institutional racism—there was no consultation with the majority of Travellers in Scotland. That is a short answer to your question.

Janet McPhee: Our site in Kirkcaldy is a good site and everyone is trying to make it better. We have started our own association and youth clubs for the kids.

The site has chalets in bays around the outside and a space in the middle for other bays. However, the part in the middle is dangerous for kids because a car could hit them if they run out of a bay. The chalets have a toilet, a small sink in which to wash face and hands and a bath on the other side—that is all. In the kitchen, there is a kitchen unit and space for a washing machine and

tumble drier, but only one double socket, which is supposed to be for all your electrical appliances. There have been heaps of problems with that. One of the chalets went on fire because the electricity was overloaded.

I have a caravan and for the whole of last weekend, until Tuesday, I had to do without electricity because of the second-hand meters that had been installed when the site was built five years ago. That was all that could be afforded at the time. Only now is the installation of new meters being considered, because of the problems with the second-hand ones.

Mr McMahon: No doubt you have discussions about these problems.

Janet McPhee: Yes. As we have an association, we hold meetings with the head of the council in Kirkcaldy. We had to cancel a meeting with him to come here today. We are fighting to make the sites better for Travellers. We go along to meetings to discuss the problems, but people say one thing and do another.

Mr McMahon: Are there cases of good practice, with good sites and good amenities, while that is not the case in other areas? You do not have any say—

Janet McPhee: To be truthful, I have been on a lot of sites in Scotland, although I have never been to any sites in England, and I have never seen a good one yet—at least not one that was properly built to accommodate Travellers. I have four children, three boys and a girl, in one caravan. I have to take two of them to school in the morning, and I have to bath them in that chalet. There is one heater on the wall as you go into the chalet, and if you put that heater on to bath the children, all the heat goes out the door with the kids coming in and out. The kids get no benefit from the heat. The cost is £3 or £4 by the time the chalet has been heated up.

Mark Kennedy: In answer to Michael McMahon's question about good practice, the electric meters that have been mentioned are operated by power cards that are not available to the general public. They can only be bought from the site manager or the local council. One reason for that is control, and I am not quite sure if that is good practice. The tariff rates are extortionate. We invited the electricity companies to come along and explain the tariffs to us and we asked the councils about them, but, again, nothing happened.

Generally, people think that good practice means that there is no trouble with Travellers within a council area. Members of the committee really need to come out to a site and have a look. At the site at Whitecraig, which has 20 families, pylons have been built on either side to carry

electricity. Although there is no evidence one way or the other, those pylons have been deemed to be okay, as they affect only Travellers. The problem is that people like me deeply resent having to keep coming back, explaining ourselves and asking for help.

We are not asking you to build us houses. We are not asking you to do anything that is not in accord with basic, human dignity—that is all we are asking. However, even that seems to be too much. Someone must take the lead. As for equal opportunities, I would like that for my children and for my grandchildren. I would like them to be proud of their culture. I would also like to be a proud Scot, but I cannot be both, because you will not allow it.

Johann Lamont (Glasgow Pollok) (Lab): I thank the witnesses for the statements that they have made today, and I look forward to reading the papers that have been provided. What has been said has certainly provided a lot of food for thought. I consider myself to be committed to equal opportunities and we all have areas where we start off. The issues that you have highlighted today are important and give us an opportunity to move on.

I was interested in your description of how the chalets have developed. I have always taken the view that if the people who are in poor-quality council housing are consulted, it is less likely that mistakes are made when such housing is built. How do you think proper consultation with Travellers can take place, so that well-intentioned authorities get it right?

I am also interested in what you think should be the main rights that we should establish for young people in relation to education. What should schools be obliged to do to ensure that your children have the same opportunities to get an education as youngsters who do not travel have?

I do not regard you as coming and asking for anything. You are making statements about your culture and your beliefs. Sadly, a lot of us do not know an awful lot about that, and that lack of knowledge often turns into hostility. Tackling discrimination also gives us an opportunity to celebrate difference. How can we do that? How can we educate our broader community about your culture? How can we begin to open up the situation and to celebrate your culture as much as we celebrate other cultures in our communities?

Cathy McInnes: I will speak about children and schools. We want our children to have equal opportunities with every other child in a school. In Larkhall, a school that has four Traveller children puts them in a room on their own and gives them a separate playground, which is ridiculous. I rang up and asked if we could come and talk to the school

to try to sort out the situation, but the woman I spoke to told me, "We don't have a problem with them." The simple fact that she called the children "them" means that she set them apart from other children.

She said, "I have a five-year-old who is mixing with the other children, but he gets tired so we let him out to run at 12 o'clock", like she was talking about a dog. She sends him home at 12 o'clock because she assumes that Traveller children run wild and cannot stay in the classroom all day. That child is getting only half the education of anyone else's child. There was no coming or going with that woman. She just could not see where she was in the wrong. Apart from the expense to the public, who are paying the extra teacher's wages, why did she have those four children in a separate class? They are not getting the same education as other children.

Johann Lamont: The other children are losing the opportunity to learn about Traveller culture.

Cathy McInnes: Apparently, at a school in Ireland, three days are set aside for Traveller children to show other children what they do. For example, they might talk about mummy cleaning the house today and then they might talk about mummy cleaning the caravan. That is more equal.

Sometimes, travelling children go into school a bit later than other children and are simply ignored, because the teacher does not have the time or patience to be bothered to teach them. On one occasion, a teacher—who did not realise that I was a Traveller because I was speaking to her on the phone from work—said to me that that was not a problem, as the Travellers would be moving on soon. I told her that the Travellers would not be moving on, because they go to church in that area.

When we move to an area, my children and grandchildren never miss school. However, when we moved to Larkhall, the children were not allowed to go to school because it was two months before the summer holidays, so they lost two months' education. After the holidays, they went to three schools and were refused at all of them. When my daughter came back very distressed, I rang one of those schools and, without letting the woman at the end know that I was a Traveller, told her that I was moving into the area and wanted to know all about what went on in the school. After she had told me about it, I said, "Well, you won't have any room at the moment, though", to which she replied, "Oh, we have lots of room." There was no room in the school the day before because Traveller kids wanted to go to it. She told me to send the children to another school that took Travellers, and the fact that she knew that a certain school took Travellers shows how they treat our children.

Janet McPhee: My two younger children go to school. Although my eldest child is due to go to high school, I am not sending him there. Two teachers teach the children who do not go to high school on the site. My two younger children get a taxi to Thornton Primary School in the morning. A wee boy banged into my youngest one, who has just turned seven, and gave him a black eye. The school would have phoned up any other mum and told them, "Your kid's had an accident and he's got a black eye." I found out only when he came home that night in the taxi. I have had problems with the school two or three times. When he fell and put a big knot in the back of his head, the school did not phone to let me know that he had hurt himself.

Cathy McInnes mentioned the school in Ireland where children are taught about their culture. My children are also taught about their culture. They get wee books and two teachers spend Tuesday and Friday with them teaching them about it.

14:00

Mark Kennedy: As for the third part of your question, if your diary is open, the week-long International Roma Festival will start in Glasgow on Monday 11 September. That might provide an opportunity for people to find out about the culture.

It is very difficult to express culture when you are dealing with survival. There is the constant burning question of Travellers not sending their teenagers to secondary schools. As you can probably tell, I am old enough to remember the education system of the 60s. The secondary school I went to was a nightmare, and our education was just about survival. We did not have the time to read and write because we were being spat upon, bullied and generally abused by the pupils and the majority of teachers.

In our community, as in many other ethnic communities in Scotland, there is an uncomfortable sense that trying to integrate our children in secondary schools does not work, because the people who run the schools do not think that there is any problem in the first place. Many parents are just not prepared to put their kids through that.

Michelle Lloyd: On your point about consultation on sites, it is quite easy to carry out such consultation, starting with people who live on the site. Although some issues might call for a more national consultation, most Traveller families are not asking for anything different from other local tenants.

As for education, the committee might not be aware that, for many years up to the end of last year, central Government funded a special initiative in England and Wales in recognition of the difficulties encountered in accessing

education. That initiative could take the form of specialist teachers, transport, or the development of materials for use in schools to raise awareness in the way that some people have mentioned. To my knowledge, there has never been an equivalent in Scotland. We at Save the Children feel that there must be some steer from central Government. Although there are isolated examples of good practice, unfortunately there are many more examples of bad practice or of ignoring the issue and hoping that it will go away.

On the issue of raising public awareness, we suggest that, because of the level of discrimination against and the acceptability of racist comments and racist practices towards Travellers, perhaps the issue needs a very public campaign along the lines of the Zero Tolerance Trust to challenge people's prejudice. Obviously, we hope that the committee and the Parliament will take the lead in challenging the discrimination that has been allowed to exist for far too long.

Shona Robison (North-East Scotland) (SNP):

Thanks very much for your evidence; it has been very useful. I was particularly interested in the recommendations on the back of the "Moving Targets" document. As many issues have been raised and many problems have to be addressed, we need to find a starting point. Perhaps a good one would be the first recommendation, which says:

"An external expert/working party should be commissioned to review the operation of Government policy"

and to examine the discrimination issues that have been mentioned.

Who would be part of such a working party? Would it report to this committee and to the Executive? We just want to find out how to develop this issue in a more structured way. Although changes will not happen overnight, it is clear that we need more information and that we must undertake some research and collect data. Certainly, the working party seems a good place to start.

Mark Kennedy: The "Moving Targets" document should be the starting point. This committee and MSPs must be willing to admit that there is a real problem with discrimination in Scotland and that it is not acceptable. The fact that it is unacceptable for any other minority should be the foundation for this ethnic group. The behaviour and language used about Travellers should not be derogatory.

For example, although the Stephen Lawrence group was set up to examine Scottish discrimination issues, it was felt that Travellers did not need representation. Unless you think that we are entitled to represent ourselves, there is

nowhere else for us to go.

Janet McPhee: Travellers should be involved in any working party that is set up. In Kirkcaldy, our working party works with councillors and the head of the council. At a meeting a couple of months ago we managed to get funding for new domestic meters on our site, which means that we can go into town and buy our own power cards, instead of getting them from the manager.

Mark Kennedy: The particular cards used throughout most of Scotland are discriminatory because they are supplied only by the council. In the past 18 months, electricity tariffs have gone down in most people's homes. I would be interested to find out how much the tariff has come down in the sites; from information that I have received, it has not come down at all.

Cathy McInnes: People who live in council houses have free rent at Christmas and New Year. We pay more rent and are not allowed any of those things.

Mark Kennedy: As I said at the beginning, it is pointless for the four of us to sit here, representing all the Travellers. I invite the committee to examine the sites and ask the people questions. At least committee members will get a sense of what is happening in the sites and of who these people are, instead of reading the extremely negative publicity that we get, particularly around Edinburgh at the moment because of unauthorised encampments. Edinburgh has been unable to provide a secondary site. We use the example of Edinburgh, because if it can hold the festival and open its arms to all other cultures, why can it not find a piece of ground for this community? It seems a simple question, to which nobody has an answer.

Janet McPhee: Our association wrote a letter to Marilyn Livingstone about the Kelty site. Kirkcaldy has a 50-pitch target—we call pitches bays. Once that target is complete, that is it. We have 33 families on the waiting list to get into sites. What will happen to them? They will have to move out of the area because there is a 50-pitch target. We have been fighting for a stopping place for Travellers. If they come into Kirkcaldy, they get sent to Dunfermline. The site that will be built at Kelty is near there.

The Convener: I am aware that when a council has met a notional target, it can legally move people on from so-called illegal encampments. Who decides what that number should be?

Mark Kennedy: It was decided 30 years ago.

Michelle Lloyd: The advisory committee and local councils decide on the target. As Mark Kennedy says, most of the figures have remained constant over the past 30 years. No account is

taken of family growth.

Mark Kennedy: There are between 10,000 and 15,000 Travellers in Scotland. The pitch targets seem to be the magical answer for councils. As Janet McPhee has said, once they reach those targets, they have solved the problem.

I would like to know where the hole is into which they are going to put the Travellers who cannot get on to those sites. Are they going to lock up all the adults and put all the children into care? The problem will continue. It needs to be taken on board that Travellers will not just disappear; we have been here a long time and we are not going away. We held a seminar in Edinburgh on how we can help you to help us. We are not the problem. None of us at this table is the problem.

Michelle Lloyd: I will respond to Shona Robison's direct question on whether the independent working party is a way forward. I think that it is an obvious way forward. I am sure that that there are very few other committees with a capital expenditure budget that have not been evaluated or monitored for 30 years. There are numerous examples of working parties in Ireland, England and Wales that have brought together representatives from academia, the Traveller community, and the legal and housing professions, to find a way forward. However, that has only happened after it has been recognised that there are difficulties and, in Scotland, it is unfortunate that the advisory committee has yet to recognise that that is the case.

Marilyn Livingstone (Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Like Johann Lamont, I thank you for coming to the committee. Although we maybe knew the facts and figures, it is different when one hears them from people. I have visited the Heatherywood site, although I admit that it was several years ago.

I wanted to ask a question similar to that asked by Shona Robison about the big picture—about whether you think that we should take things forward nationally through an independent working party. As Shona asked that question, I will ask a couple of other questions. I live in the same area as Janet McPhee does, so I will address my questions to her. Do you feel that the liaison committee is worth while? Could it be used as an example of good practice?

Janet McPhee: Yes.

Marilyn Livingstone: It would perhaps be good to consider examples of good practice, which could be rolled out. Perhaps this is not the best forum in which to do that.

I am interested in the issue of education and training and, in particular, the current further education project. Has that project been of benefit? Is it limited to one area?

Janet McPhee: It is limited to Heatherywood at the moment. An association is being started up at Tarvit Mill, where, although it was built 15 years ago, nothing has happened—it was built, the manager manages it, and it has been forgotten about. Heatherywood was built five years ago. The Traveller women—Frances, Susie, another lady and I—got together in winter because all the kids were running about the site at night and were not doing anything. There was a big Portakabin on the site that was not being used. We started a youth club there for the children, which led on to the association. The boys' training has been going on since August.

Marilyn Livingstone: Has that been useful?

Janet McPhee: As you know, the computer courses will start up in the winter. We are away for a couple of months in the summertime, and when we come back we will start up the literacy course for the adults who cannot read and write and computer courses for those who want them. I want to learn to work with computers so that I can write letters for the association that I started. I only had five years at school—not even five years, because I was away in the summertime and back in the winter.

14:15

Mark Kennedy: The SGTA and Scottish Enterprise put the training package together for the Heatherywood men. It deals with health and safety and a range of other issues. Without getting into politics, the SGTA takes the view that Scotland is an individual nation with its own system. Given the cultural differences between the Scottish people and people in England or Ireland and the legal and political differences between Scotland and those countries, it would be wrong to lift practices from England or Ireland. That does not work for all sorts of political reasons and so on.

There are people who are experts. With the greatest respect to them, the problem with experts is that they get in their own way. When someone becomes an expert, they become less and less aware of other things, as they concentrate on being an expert in their chosen field. All sorts of things start to happen. People start to forget about the most important people—the service users. Service providers forget that there are service users.

Travellers are service users who are not being served at any level in Scotland. There are small pockets where they are being served, but it would be wrong for this committee to use them as banners of the good that has been done because, at this moment, children are being bullied in school and want to go home. There are some children who will not go to school because of the treatment

they receive, yet some teachers—a few not so far away from where we are now—say that there are no problems. I would rather have people than experts.

Mr Jamie McGrigor (Highlands and Islands) (Con): Janet McPhee mentioned bad media coverage. The media influences public thinking to a great extent and can be persuaded to take up cases of minorities because it makes a good story. Do you think the media deliberately gives Travellers bad coverage?

Mark Kennedy: Like all communities, we have a small band of people who are a problem. From the media's point of view, bad headlines make better reading than good headlines.

A recent drama programme on BBC1 used the word "gippo". Use of such a derogatory word would not have been allowed in relation to any other section of society. I have not read anything about the use of that discriminatory word. I find it offensive, but the media seems to get away with using it.

Mr McGrigor: Given that intolerance stems from ignorance, do you agree that further exposure of the culture of travelling people would be helpful?

Mark Kennedy: In any society, many communities have problems. People in Broomhouse or Sighthill have problems. Politicians seem to play communities against each other and tell us that if one group is given something, another will be deprived. I will give the politicians the benefit of the doubt and say that they are thoughtless. The problem is one of ignorance.

Janet McPhee: I worked with the media a few months ago on a story about my father. My father took cancer four years ago. We took him to Buckie to visit my sisters and had to stay beside the beach because the site near Elgin was flooded. To us, the beach belongs to nobody—no one owns the beach, not even the Queen—but the police came down and shifted us. They were going to charge my father but he was in his bed, dying, so they decided to charge my mother instead. She was 72 and had to travel all the way from Kirkcaldy to Elgin for a court appearance after my father died. After she got there, the court took pity on her and let her off with a £25 fine for camping. The media put my story in the paper.

Mark Kennedy: The story that comes to mind is the recent one about Edinburgh airport. Seemingly, pilots thought that lights the Travellers who were staying nearby used were a danger as they might be confused with airport lights. I would not like to be in a plane with a pilot if he cannot recognise airport lights. It does not inspire a lot of confidence. The media got involved, it became a hoo-ha, the council got involved and we went

through the same stuff all over again.

Nora Radcliffe (Gordon) (LD): I have some observations as well as questions. Would it be helpful to have some sort of legal recognition of people who prefer a travelling lifestyle, which put a requirement on local authorities and health boards to make the special provision that is needed to accommodate such a lifestyle?

Do you prefer to be integrated into the settled community's education system or is it better to have specific education provision that is more geared towards people who come and go? There are teachers attached to some sites. Is that preferable, or do you want both options?

Building standards regulations are under review. There may be an option to get on the statute book something that takes account of travelling people's sites and says that standards should apply to anything built for you.

Mark Kennedy: Cathy McInnes and Janet McPhee will deal with the education question. Criteria already exist for legal recognition.

Michelle Lloyd: The Commission for Racial Equality recognises Travellers as an ethnic group as described in the Race Relations Act 1976. However, there has not been a test case in Scotland and most local authorities still ignore that. Mark Kennedy may want to comment on whether the Commission for Racial Equality has played much of a role to date.

Mark Kennedy: I have not seen much evidence of that. One of the problems is that travelling communities, because of their nature, are extremely shy. We do not want to intrude.

Nora Radcliffe: That is because you are fairly self-sufficient.

Mark Kennedy: It is partly that and partly survival, because if you come round, you will change things, because you know best. That generally causes all sorts of hassle. There are criteria; the question is whether the people who have the power, who are sitting round this room, are willing to take them on board.

I will let the others answer the education question.

Cathy McInnes: I am not quite sure what was meant. The Travellers with whom I work in Perth and Kinross do not move. There have been people on the site for 150 years, but Travellers are still not allowed into some of the schools, including the school nearest the site where they live, so parents have to take a taxi into the centre of Perth to send their children to school. Most parents do not want their children educated on the site, because that still sets them apart. That is like building a big fence round the people—hide them, give them a

school. We want to live as people with the same rights and opportunities as everybody else. I want the children that I am representing today to have the same rights and opportunities as every other child out there.

The Convener: Did Janet McPhee want to have the last word?

Mark Kennedy: May I take two seconds, before Janet finishes, to mention something really important on education. When I left school aged 14 I could barely write my name. I had been in the system since I was five. I went to university three years ago and was diagnosed as having quite a severe form of dyslexia. I know other people in this room with a university education who are Travellers. My point is that, like any other group, success depends on the people involved. School was not the way to teach me. When I saw the sun, I wanted off. I was a disruptive pupil—for a whole load of reasons—so they spent more time disciplining me than teaching me.

Nora Radcliffe: If you could have had your education as you moved around, would that have been helpful?

Mark Kennedy: I watched “Panorama” last night, which was on the subject of schools. On that programme was one young boy from London who was bored with the school and the way in which it set out to educate him. They came along with another system for him, in which someone is personally involved with him, and the boy is coming on in leaps and bounds. The situation is not peculiar to Travellers. Different people need different types of education.

The Convener: I will bring in Janet for a last word, but before I do I must tell you that we will hear from other witnesses on this matter. The committee will then discuss how it will take this issue forward. I stress that we will be taking it forward.

Janet McPhee: I went to school for five years from the age of five. In the summer time and for half of the winter I was away, so I did not get much schooling. Because of that, I put my children to school. My children went to nursery and to primary school, but I point-blank refused to put them to high school. There is too much drugs and sex in high school and I do not want that for my children. My oldest boy is 13. He gets taught twice a week on the site. The teachers come up and teach him.

My brother in law went to school from the age of five until he was 16. He is dyslexic and he learned nothing in school. He cannot even spell his name. My boy can read and write. I know young teenagers who have been to college and cannot get work. My son is not going to school, but he is going out with his father. He is learning his culture and he is learning how to work for himself. When

he grows up he will be able to go out and work and make his living. We would like young Travellers to come to your next meeting to give their views.

Michelle Lloyd: We make that request because there were limited places here today. A couple of young Travellers wanted to be part of this meeting but could not be.

The Convener: The committee would want to take up that offer. I was in Dundee when there was a meeting about these issues, and there was a video with young people on it. We will get in touch with you to discuss how we can take this forward. Thank you for coming along to the committee today. We will now move into private session.

14:30

Meeting continued in private until 15:20.

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