



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

Official Report

EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

Thursday 10 January 2013

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EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES COMMITTEE

1st Meeting 2013, Session 4

CONVENER

*Mary Fee (West Scotland) (Lab)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

John Finnie (Highlands and Islands) (Ind)

Annabel Goldie (West Scotland) (Con)

*John Mason (Glasgow Shettleston) (SNP)

*Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab)

*Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Christopher Ahern (North Muirton Community Council)

James Brownhill (Nigg Community Council)

Sheila Chambers (Cockenzie and Port Seton Community Council)

Kenneth Johnstone (Girvan and District Community Council)

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con) (Committee Substitute)

Elizabeth Rhodick (Lochgilphead Community Council)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Douglas Thornton

LOCATION

Committee Room 4

Scottish Parliament

Equal Opportunities Committee

Thursday 10 January 2013

[The Convener *opened the meeting at 09:31*]

Where Gypsy Travellers Live

The Convener (Mary Fee): Good morning, everyone, and happy new year to you all. Welcome to the Equal Opportunities Committee's first meeting in 2013. Everyone should set their electronic devices to flight mode or switch them off completely, please.

I will introduce everyone at the table. With members and witnesses are the clerking and research team, official reporters and broadcasting services. Around the room, we are supported by the security office. I welcome the observers in the public gallery.

I am the committee's convener. I ask committee members and witnesses to introduce themselves in turn.

Marco Biagi (Edinburgh Central) (SNP): I am the MSP for Edinburgh Central and deputy convener of the committee.

Dennis Robertson (Aberdeenshire West) (SNP): Good morning. I am the MSP for Aberdeenshire West.

Alex Johnstone (North East Scotland) (Con): I am an MSP for North East Scotland and a substitute member of the committee.

Siobhan McMahon (Central Scotland) (Lab): I am an MSP for Central Scotland.

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

Elizabeth Rhodick (Lochgilhead Community Council): I am Elizabeth Rhodick, but I like to be known as Betty. I am the vice-convenor of Lochgilhead community council.

Kenneth Johnstone (Girvan and District Community Council): I am Kenneth Johnstone from Girvan. I prefer to be known as Ken.

Sheila Chambers (Cockenzie and Port Seton Community Council): I am vice-chair of Cockenzie and Port Seton community council and I am representing all the community councils in East Lothian.

James Brownhill (Nigg Community Council): I am vice-chairman of Nigg community council in Aberdeen city.

Christopher Ahern (North Muirton Community Council): I am Chris Ahern. I am the chairman of North Muirton community council in Perth.

The Convener: Thank you. We have apologies from John Finnie MSP, who is unwell and is unable to attend the meeting.

Agenda item 1 is an evidence session with representatives from community councils on where Gypsy Travellers live. I welcome Christopher Ahern, James Brownhill, Sheila Chambers, Kenneth Johnstone and Elizabeth Rhodick.

What we hear today will help us to better understand the relationship between the settled community and Gypsy Travellers and will help to inform our future evidence sessions and our inquiry report. Committee members will have a number of questions for our witnesses. I will start with questions for each witness. What involvement have you had with Gypsy Travellers in your area? Has any of you visited any Gypsy Traveller sites?

Christopher Ahern: The Double Dykes permanent site is about a mile away from where we are, and we have two areas that the people like to use as sites. About three months ago, I visited the Travellers on one of the unofficial sites. That was by accident, as we were up there with planners who were planning to build on the site on which they were camped.

The Travellers were quite pleasant; indeed, all those whom we have visited are pleasant enough to talk to. They understand the problems, but they simply leave a problem. We have never had any animosity with them. Most of the complaints have been about the mess that they have left behind, but we have not had an anger problem or other problem with them.

James Brownhill: Nigg community council covers the southern part of Aberdeen city, which is a fairly rural area but is close to industrial estates. The area seems to have been fairly attractive to Gypsy Travellers over many years, primarily in summer, but also in winter. Our experience in the community council is purely of unauthorised campsites. There is no halting site for Gypsy Travellers in Aberdeen city, but they have one site at Clinterty, outside the city, which is criticised as being a bit far out and remote.

Our experience is purely of unauthorised travelling sites. I have not gone to them after the Gypsy Travellers have left, but I have walked through them while the Gypsy Travellers are there, which is not a pleasant experience. Our experience of sites over many years has been not at all favourable. As the gentleman who is sitting alongside me said, there is a problem with what the Gypsy Travellers leave behind, which is most

unsavoury. However, the problem is also to an extent harassment while they are there and noise for people who live close by, and fly-tipping seems to be standard for almost every unauthorised encampment. Unfortunately, human waste is often left behind, too, in a fairly unsavoury manner.

In the past, we and the city of Aberdeen community council forum have tried to get the Gypsy Traveller community to attend meetings, but it has never taken up that offer with us as a community council or with the citywide forum. From speaking to other community councils in the city and to some in the shire, I have found that unauthorised campsites are a widespread problem and that they give a particularly unfavourable impression. When Aberdeen City Council talks about an authorised campsite—it temporarily designated a site as such in our community council area recently—that is therefore not particularly well received by the settled community. The Gypsy Travellers are not particularly welcome, because they do not have a good reputation at all.

Aberdeen City Council's offer of the current temporary site for Gypsy Travellers was executed as a verbal arrangement for a group of 12 units, but that figure has risen to 28. That does not go down particularly well locally with the residential community and the business community. The latter now meets every two weeks to address the problem, which concerns not just the fly-tipping that has been witnessed but security breaches in the neighbouring industrial estate and loss of stock from some retail outlets.

It is difficult to assess how long the authorised campsite will continue, but its establishment seems to have been based originally on one of the Gypsy Traveller ladies being pregnant and wanting to give birth at Aberdeen maternity hospital. That has now happened, and we have two meetings today with the council to see what the future holds for the campsite.

Generally speaking, the Gypsy Travellers, who tend to be transient in Aberdeen and are so throughout the year, do not have a good reputation with the settled community. As a result, no settled community really wants to see a permanent halting site on its doorstep.

Sheila Chambers: In preparation for today's session, I emailed all the other community councils in East Lothian. There is one official site in East Lothian that is used throughout the year, and no problems are reported from that.

However, there appear to be quite a number of problems along the coast, where we have some lovely beaches that attract a lot of tourists in the summer. Travellers go to several sites that are mainly adjacent to nice beaches, where they tend

to stay for very short periods of up to two weeks. Many of those sites are not particularly close to the settled community—for instance, Longniddry bents is some distance from most of the local houses—but, when the Travellers are there, they deter tourists. If the Travellers are in the car park, tourists are reluctant to go into it, partly because of the mess and partly because of reports of the abusive attitudes of the Travellers.

From speaking to a number of people in East Lothian, I know that many recognise and respect the fact that Travellers have a different way of life and a different culture, but there is a strong feeling that that respect is not mutual. Therefore, the Travellers do not have a very good reputation. In particular, the mess that they leave behind is worrying. We are aware that dealing with that has cost East Lothian Council a considerable sum of money. Some of the mess is offensive.

A fairly new problem that has arisen is that, since the council put up barriers at the Longniddry car park so that the Travellers could no longer get in with their caravans, the Travellers have started coming to the land around Cockenzie power station. Cockenzie power station will close on 31 March, and we fear that the Travellers will come there more and more. The area is owned not by East Lothian Council but by Scottish Power. Ownership of the land will present another problem if it is necessary to get eviction orders or deal with the mess. Furthermore, parts of that site are quite close to local houses and there have been reports of people looking out of their windows and seeing people defecating in the open, which is not very nice.

I think that that is all for the moment.

Kenneth Johnstone: I have a totally different perspective. To be honest, I had had no interaction with Travellers until I knew that I would be coming here today. We have a permanent site in Girvan, and there has never been any trouble at all that I know of. It all seems to work very well, and it is very well managed.

Knowing that I was coming here today, I went down to the site earlier this week to have a look. As I said, the site seems to be very well managed—it could almost be said that it was a housing estate. Other than the fact that chickens are running about—we do not see many of them in housing estates—it could be any housing estate. We have had no trouble with the site, which has been there many years. To be honest, I had forgotten that we had it.

The site is well located, because it is to the north of the town and it is not near any housing. The railway sweeps around the edge of the town and the Travellers are on the other side of the railway, on the other side of a road and down in a

valley. They are not seen from the road and they are not near any houses, as I said, so I think that the site is well managed. They want to keep to themselves, and it can be managed in that way.

09:45

Elizabeth Rhodick: In Lochgilphead, we have a permanent site as well. I know that work has been done with Argyll Community Housing Association, which has modernised one site—I think that it was Torlochan. There are quite a few permanent sites in Argyll and Bute.

This might sound silly, but the problem that we get is not with our more local Travellers, if you know what I mean, but with the ones who come in. I suppose that we would class them as a different clan. They come in and they think that everything is owed to them. They are loud and they play the Gypsy Traveller card: "Let's get out of jail free".

I have a friend whose neighbours happen to be Travellers. The first few weeks were fine, and then the noise started. It was getting really bad, so she went to their door and asked them to cut it out. The fella said to her, "You're just picking on me because I'm a Traveller." She said, "No, I'm picking on you because you're a noisy B. Now cut it out." If you stand up, they know where you are.

In Lochgilphead, we have lots of people who were classed as Travellers but are no longer Travellers because they are now settled in permanent housing. They make great neighbours and are great people. I have worked with people who are Travellers, and I am friends with Travellers. If you show them respect, they show you respect back.

A lot of the problem is that, instead of talking with Travellers, people talk down to them and tell them how they should behave. People act as if they are aliens and they should be hidden out of sight. No—they are human beings, the same as you, me and everybody else. Their way of life is changing drastically because of the economic climate and because what used to happen no longer happens. I think that they are in a bit of a sway—they do not know which way to go for the best—although I feel that some of the younger ones have a big chip on their shoulders and play the Gypsy Traveller card.

In Lochgilphead, there is some trouble, but everybody knows who the people involved are and they stand up to them. If you stand up to them, you do not get trouble, but if you back down, that is when the trouble starts.

The Convener: As a follow-up, I ask you all what your community councils have done to try to engage with and understand the culture of Gypsy Travellers. I hear what you are saying about their

transient nature—you say that they come in, leave a mess and move on, that they seem to leave just antagonism and that the community's view is not particularly positive. Have your community councils done anything to improve that by engaging with Gypsy Travellers, perhaps by inviting them along and having a social evening at which they can talk about what their culture means to them?

Christopher Ahern: We have not done that, but I think that that is because many people feel intimidated by them. The site that we have the main problem with is by the side of a footpath that goes to a school. When they are there, nobody goes along it. Nobody takes their dogs for a walk along the river, and the local youth football team tends to move away because they are on one of the pitches where the team plays football. I do not think that they want to interact.

The Convener: Do you mean that the Gypsy Travellers do not want to interact or that the local community does not want to interact?

Christopher Ahern: I do not think that either the community or the Gypsies want to interact.

The Convener: But no effort has been made to try to do that.

Christopher Ahern: No.

James Brownhill: I mentioned before that our community council and the community council forum in Aberdeen have made approaches. There were three places for Gypsy Travellers to be on the forum, but all have led to nothing. That is as far as we have gone. To learn more about the culture of Gypsy Travellers, we can read transcripts of meetings such as this, for instance, but approaching them directly and sitting down with them has not worked for us.

I would be apprehensive about going into an unauthorised Gypsy Traveller encampment and approaching people in that manner. I would have to do that through, and be accompanied by, the Aberdeen City Council Gypsy Traveller liaison officer. There is no way that I would go in on my own or even that two of us from the community council would go in on our own, because I expect that we would open ourselves up to accusations of harassment.

Sheila Chambers: We have had no interaction with them at all. I suppose that that is partly because the encampments are a little bit distant from the settled places, so it is perhaps a day or two before we find out that they are there and, by that time, there is a good bit of a mess.

However, the local community policeman told me that, once the police know that a temporary site exists, they visit regularly and try to form a relationship. Generally speaking, that happens,

although it usually takes a day or two and, by that time, the people are thinking of moving on.

Most recently, we had a visitation in November—which is quite unusual, because it mostly happens in the summertime—on Cockenzie power station grounds. The police said that these people were abusive and that they—policemen in uniform—were a bit frightened. Also, as many do, the people had fairly vicious-looking dogs that were barking and putting the fear of death into people.

Kenneth Johnstone: As I said, we have had no trouble with the sites. Gypsy Travellers have never even been mentioned at any of our community council meetings, because we have plenty problems without trying to look for any. There have been no problems, so we have had no interaction until my visit this week.

Elizabeth Rhodick: I do not think that my community council has had any interaction with the Gypsy Travellers, but the people in the community have had loads of interaction. There are old worthies who just talk about Gypsy Travellers, but the younger ones are more inclined to see a more positive side and be friendly.

You can feel intimidated when you go in but, if they shout at you, the thing to do is just to speak back, not to shout back. That immediately takes the system down. People who want to visit Gypsy Travellers and feel that the Gypsy Travellers will be aggressive need to have that approach in their heads and have a bit of training about how to take a situation back down. That is easy to do, even though it takes a lot of willpower and strength.

On the whole, we have had no problems with Gypsy Travellers. The odd one shouts their mouth off but, basically, we just tell them to pull their neck in. Other than that, we have had no problems. The most problems that we have are with a different clan coming in. That is where the problems are happening in Argyll and Bute.

Christopher Ahern: We have a permanent site at Double Dykes, which is about a mile away from the two temporary sites in our community. The problem is the interaction not just between the community and the Travellers but between the Travellers and the Travellers—the people who want to have settled sites and the ones who do not.

At a previous committee meeting, when the committee took evidence from the Travellers, the comment was made that there is always the good and the bad in the travelling community, as there is in any community. That is a problem as well.

The council person who controls the permanent site now has responsibility for the two temporary sites, but he still has problems in trying to

communicate his point of view or the views of the community that is settled at Double Dykes to the other Travellers. They just do not want to listen.

John Mason: It has been interesting to listen to all of you. From what most of you have said—with some exceptions—it strikes me quite starkly that there seems to be much less of a problem with permanent sites and much more of a problem with unauthorised or informal sites. That suggests that, if we had more permanent sites for temporary use that had proper toilet and refuse facilities, that might go some way to solving some of the problems that you are talking about. Is that what you feel?

Christopher Ahern: A lot of the Travellers do not want such sites. We have different problems with the permanent site, such as the police having to go in with the electricity board because the Travellers were bypassing the electricity supply—that made the news.

There is a temporary site down near Kinross, where people can stay for a maximum of two weeks, but Travellers do not want to use it. They might sleep there, but they go to the local motorway service station to wash and shower, because it is cleaner than the site. They do not want such permanent sites.

John Mason: You are saying that they do not want second-rate permanent sites.

Christopher Ahern: Yes. Perth and Kinross Council is trying to build another site and has had the money to do so for a long time, but it cannot find a place to put it. Either the landowner does not want it or members of the council argue among themselves when they vote on the policing of it and do not put forward a proposal. Such sites are often dirty, which is why the Travellers do not want to use them and use sites elsewhere.

John Mason: Is that the experience in East Lothian?

Sheila Chambers: I asked councillors what their policy was. They would like to have a site for temporary use, where there was a maximum stay of, say, two weeks, but their difficulty is finding a site. There is the nimby problem—no one wants a site next door to them. The councillors have not been able to identify a suitable place to have such a site.

John Mason: From the community council's point of view, it might be better to have a permanent site that everyone knew about than to have people appearing in different places. Is that right?

Sheila Chambers: That would be the case if the Travellers were willing to use such a site.

Kenneth Johnstone: There is another problem with temporary sites. I know that Travellers pay a weekly rental charge to stay at the permanent site in Girvan, whereas Travellers who just turn up and camp somewhere pay nothing. If a temporary site was created that people did not have to pay to use, Travellers would probably go there rather than camp somewhere else, but the people at the permanent site would ask why they should pay when they could move to the temporary site for a while and pay nothing. It is a catch-22 situation.

James Brownhill: I do not know whether we are getting our terms mixed up, but I think of a permanent site as one where the council provides permanent facilities. It could be for Gypsy Travellers who want to stay there for a long time, on a semi-permanent basis, or it could be a halting site where Gypsy Travellers just stay for a defined period.

We have heard from Lochgilphead community council that, when Gypsy Travellers stay for an extended period over many years, they become almost part of the community. In the long term, that seems a great solution, which has been proven to work. However, when Gypsy Travellers travel through and stay at a site for five weeks, two months or whatever—even if the site is permanent—they are still a travelling community and they do not build any relationships with the local settled community. Therefore, a permanent halting site probably has some of the problems that are associated with unauthorised campsites.

Aberdeen City Council has always striven to find another permanent halting site, at which Gypsy Travellers would stay for a certain period but, as we have heard, no one in the settled community wants such a site near them, because of past experiences. However, in the past couple of weeks, the council has designated a site for a permanent facility. We do not know whether it will go ahead—the council says that it will—but the proposal has immediately met local opposition. I am not sure of the status of that, because it is very new news.

I agree that having a properly managed permanent halting site should be far better than unauthorised campsites being set up here, there and everywhere and the council having to chase people off and clear up different areas.

10:00

The Convener: In previous evidence sessions with Gypsy Travellers, we have heard about the lack of transit sites, and it has been suggested that a solution might be to carry out a mapping exercise with Gypsy Travellers in order to properly map their routes and build—if you like—

permanent transit sites. Would fixed transit sites be a good move?

Elizabeth Rhodick: If you knew the area where they were going and if you had proper maps, the answer might be yes, although you might end up with the settled community being prejudiced against them. However, the settled community is just going to have to like it or lump it, because it is part of life.

I have grandchildren who are great friends with Travellers living permanently in Lochgilphead. They might live on the permanent site—others live in houses—but they are still Travellers. My grandchildren think nothing of their being Travellers. There is an in-built prejudice that, if you are a Traveller, you are bad. That is not the case; all you get is the odd bad apple. That is what is wrong. We need to educate the settled community as well. After all, how would that community feel if it was in the same position? A perfect example in that respect is flooding, as a result of which some of the settled community have been forced to live in caravans and whatever. How would those people feel if they were told, “You can only stay there for a couple of weeks”? You might see a difference if you put the question back at them. No matter whether you are a Gypsy Traveller or a normal settled person, everyone’s lifestyle is changing as a result of the economic climate and everything else that is going on.

Sheila Chambers: Involving Travellers in discussions about the location of sites might be a step forward in getting them to use the available sites instead of the unofficial sites that undoubtedly cause problems.

James Brownhill: I read the comments about mapping traditional sites in the *Official Report* of the committee’s previous meeting. My personal view—this is not the view of Nigg community council—is that although I agree with some of the arguments that were made, the situation is, as we have heard, changing quite quickly for Gypsy Travellers and their old lifestyle is disappearing. To me, mapping their traditional sites would be a little bit of a waste of time. It would be a nice thing to do for historical purposes but it is not going to help us to move forward. We would be better to spend our time on liaising and creating a good dialogue with the Gypsy Travellers to identify their needs and expectations very much alongside those of the settled community and the council’s capabilities, and to come up with a package, which might be a permanent site with permanent residencies, a halting site or the kind of local housing that, as we have heard, has worked. However, such a package needs to be discussed by the Scottish Government, the councils, the Gypsy Traveller community and the settled community in order to reach the best solution.

Sheila Chambers: I do not think that individual community councils in East Lothian would welcome such an approach. The association of local community councils in East Lothian might be an appropriate place for such a discussion, but I think that individual community councils would find it quite difficult, partly because of the transient nature of the Travellers' stay. After all, they move on. You cannot have a relationship with people if they are only there for two weeks.

Christopher Ahern: I agree with the rest of them; I think that local communities would find it very difficult. I would certainly not agree to a transit site where we are. We have one permanent site. In the Perth and Kinross Council area, and in Tayside, there is going to be an increase in housing outside the cities, so where would we put a transit site? Most of the land that we have available for building is being used for local housing, so we would certainly not appreciate that being used.

Our area is virtually within Perth city centre, and that is where they come in to. It is not just our local community; I do not think that any local community in Perth or in any city would agree to a Travellers site within the city boundaries.

James Brownhill: I agree. Within the city boundaries it is tough, because there is not that much space. In my experience, there is very little space in Aberdeen city. I am not saying, after all this dialogue and discussion, that the answer is necessarily that the best site would be within the city. I believe personally—and it has been recorded elsewhere—that the Gypsy Travellers like their seclusion. They like having their family around them, and they like their privacy, and they do not get that among the settled community, at least not close up. They need to be somewhere where they are slightly detached from the settled community.

They say that Clinterty is too far out of Aberdeen, but in such situations dialogue needs to be set up to find the optimum solution. That will not be necessarily mean a site that is right next door to a settled community—or, as Aberdeen City Council is promoting in a local development plan, Gypsy Traveller sites within major developments, which will not work. Gypsy Travellers want their seclusion, and the settled community does not want its human rights abused, so a compromise has to be reached somehow. The optimum Gypsy Traveller site will not be next door to a settled community.

Marco Biagi: You have outlined a wide range of issues that have come up in your experiences. Where, primarily, do you think responsibility and leadership should come from to resolve those issues? Some of you have already touched on that issue, but I would be interested to know where all

the participants think the leadership should come from.

James Brownhill: At one of the committee's previous meetings, someone—I cannot remember who; it could have been you—talked about the three Ls: legitimacy, land and leadership. We need legitimacy for Gypsy Travellers' human rights and equality—I am sure that all of us here agree with that, as does Nigg community council; the land on which they are going to live temporarily; and the leadership that will sort all this out.

You asked about where that leadership will come from. It cannot come from the community councils as we do not have enough influence. We are volunteers. It has to come from the regional councils, and from Aberdeen City Council in my case.

I am not that familiar with the Scottish Government, but perhaps leadership should come from higher up so that—again, I have read such views before—we all do the same sort of things. There should be a standard, so that a Gypsy Traveller who comes from the Highlands to Edinburgh knows what to expect and what might be there rather than things being done on a piecemeal basis. I do not know.

Christopher Ahern: I think that leadership has to come from the Scottish Government and the Gypsy leaders. However the Gypsy community is formed and whoever is in charge of it, the leadership must come from them.

I do not think that leadership has to come regionally, because much of the time the regional council will say, "We do not want that; we do not want to spend money on it", and will just pass the buck. The leadership has to come from central Government and the Gypsy community leadership.

Kenneth Johnstone: I feel that leadership should come from you here at the Scottish Government, and work down through the councils.

Elizabeth Rhodick: I agree. Leadership should come from Government, because everyone will then have to sing from the same hymn sheet whether they like it or not. That is the problem: a lot of people are just pushing the issue under the carpet.

The Convener: I will allow Alex Johnstone a brief supplementary before we come back to Marco Biagi.

Alex Johnstone: On that subject, my experience is that the Scottish Government guidelines are probably inadequate, but they provide some guidance, and there is a view that they help to guide what happens. Coming from the north-east, I have experience of working on the problem in a range of rural and city local

government areas. In my experience, local authorities will interpret the same opinion or guidance in a whole series of different ways. In the witnesses' view, does local government need to be given much stronger guidance, or is the current system involving a series of different interpretations sustainable?

Sheila Chambers: Given the diversity of the different areas of Scotland, I think that it would be impossible to have the same interpretation of Scottish Government guidelines in each area. As well as cities and rural areas, we have areas that are attractive to tourists and areas that are less so. There are all sorts of different things in each area, so it is unrealistic to make a blanket ruling for all and expect everyone to interpret it in a similar manner.

Alex Johnstone: You have suggested that we need strong guidance to come down from the top, but if it will be interpreted differently everywhere, what is the advantage in having strong central guidance?

Christopher Ahern: It would be the same across the board.

Alex Johnstone: But if it is interpreted differently in different areas—

Christopher Ahern: That depends on how the Gypsy Traveller community feels about being dictated to. Anything that comes from central Government feels like diktat.

Alex Johnstone: What I am trying to get at is whether we need a one-size-fits-all approach or whether we need to build on the current piecemeal approach.

Christopher Ahern: If central Government decided what was going to happen, the matter would still be pushed out to the local authorities, which would still need to get involved. The decision about what is to happen should come from here and be passed down to the local authorities. For example, councils in Perth and Kinross and Tayside might be told, "This is what you have got. These are where the Travellers come. You must provide one site. You must find it." If the edict came from central Government in consultation with the Travellers, I think that you would get a much better result. However, I do not think that the Travellers would like being dictated to.

Sheila Chambers: I am not sure about this, but I do not think that East Lothian Council has had any interaction with the Travellers themselves. In a way, interaction is key to developing relationships with the Travellers and getting the ones who do not behave very responsibly to respect the settled community.

Kenneth Johnstone: You mentioned setting up a route that the Travellers might follow. If you did that, you would have to go to each local authority and say, "We need a site within so many miles of point A", so that there was a day's travelling or whatever between the sites. Some body—although only the Scottish Government could do this—would need to say to each local authority, "Okay, we need a site in your area." The local authority would need to be told that a site was required perhaps not in a specific spot but in a given area. That is the only way that it would work.

James Brownhill: Alex Johnstone may be familiar with the Cairnforth report that was produced for Aberdeen City, Aberdeenshire and Moray in 2008. Those three authorities were complimented on getting together to try to evaluate what the Gypsy Travellers required. I was not involved with the report or aware of it at the time, but I have read it and it seems to me that the authorities consulted the Gypsy Travellers and came up with some facts and figures about what was required.

Although the report was a good effort, it is nearly five years old and is perhaps less relevant now. As we have heard, things are changing all the time for the Gypsy Travellers. The report was a combined attempt to find out some facts and do something about the situation. I am not particularly knowledgeable, but I think that there has been a failure to act on its findings. I do not know how familiar Alex Johnstone is with the report but he might be better able to comment on it than I am.

Alex Johnstone: I am no expert on the report. It is certainly a commendable effort but it has been lying for a long time with little progress, for all the reasons that you outlined earlier.

10:15

Marco Biagi: I return to the idea of national leadership, which Alex Johnstone fleshed out quite well. Why would national leadership be able to achieve results and deliver something noticeable on the ground in a way that council leadership has not thus far? You all have sites in your areas at the moment. However, let us say that you did not, and that after some kind of national guidance or decision you were told that you should have a transit site in your area and that you would just have to live with that. How would you respond? I would imagine that such guidance would throw up the same difficulties, opposition and community issues as if it came from the council.

Christopher Ahern: If it came from central Government, it would be standardised across the board. If it was just left to local authorities, you would have one opinion from one local authority and another opinion from another local authority,

and so forth across the country. Travellers might say, "They're too strict there. They're not interested. We'll move elsewhere." We would just be pushing the problem around the country. However, if there was a standardised approach throughout the country, the Gypsies and the Travellers would not have to battle with different standards throughout the country.

Sheila Chambers: Certainly in East Lothian Council, there is a negative approach to the Travellers because they make a mess and it costs the council to clear up the mess. A more positive approach could be floated. Rather than seeing the Travellers as a problem and reacting when they arrive, which is what happens, there could be interaction with them.

Elizabeth Rhodick: I agree that there is a negative approach in a lot of council areas. You hear Travellers talking about it. Rather than councils waiting until the temporary sites get mucky and unhygienic, why do the liaison officers not ask, "Do you require toilet facilities?" There are mobile ones—the ones that are used for events and so on. That might let Travellers see that they are not just out on a limb and being dictated to. Rather than saying, "You have to have it," be nice about it. Instead of going in and saying, "You can't do this or that," if you go in with a positive approach you will come out with positivity at the end. Let's face it, no one wants somebody to come into their home and tell them what they can or cannot do. There must be a change in approach.

Christopher Ahern: As I said earlier, Perth and Kinross Council has put aside money to do another transit site with somebody on it and permanent facilities. However, the council is not going to make any money from the site, so it is a cost to the council that we—the council tax payers—are going to have to come up with the money for.

James Brownhill: We talked about the 2008 report from Aberdeen City Council. Nothing much has been done since then. The problem has not gone away and seems to have got worse and worse because there are more and more unauthorised campsites.

I believe that leadership from above the councils is required to ensure that something gets done, otherwise, in my experience, the councils just squirm, look in the opposite direction and hope that the issue will go away. However, it will not go away. The Gypsy Travellers are here, and we recognise them as being here and that something needs to be done for them. However, it is not a particularly pleasant task to find the right location.

The Convener: Siobhan McMahon has a supplementary question.

Siobhan McMahon: It is just a point about a language problem that is starting to irritate me. Some of the witnesses have said that they have read the committee's reports. Throughout our reports, we have used the term "Gypsy Traveller". That is an ethnic grouping that we talk about. We do not talk about "Gypsies", we certainly do not talk about "Travellers" and we do not talk about "these people". There are other issues that I would like to deal with but, frankly, if this committee is being consistent in all its reports, all we would ask is that everyone uses the same terminology. If we were talking about any other ethnic group, we would do the same. I would appreciate it if we could do that.

Dennis Robertson: If my understanding is correct, none of the witnesses has engaged with the Gypsy Travelling community. Therefore, it appears that a lot of what they are saying is based on assumption and perception. It is becoming fairly evident that, with a couple of exceptions, the approach is that something needs to be done, but not in close proximity to where you live. If it is not going to be in close proximity to where you live, where will it be? Mr Brownhill referred to a report in the north-east in 2008 in which three councils came together and which highlighted that there should be about 35 pitches in the north-east, but there is only one site. If we take that basic arithmetic, we can see that there is a problem for our Gypsy Travelling community about where they can go. They are an ethnic group of people who travel, and even those in the settled community still prefer to be called Gypsy Travellers, regardless of the fact that they have settled in permanent housing.

I do not particularly like the term "nimbyism", but I am concerned that it appears that you might be content to pay a degree of lip service to the problem, but there endeth the story, because you are not prepared to engage. In fact, we heard this morning that you would not even be prepared to go in pairs to engage in dialogue. My understanding is that, in the north-east, there actually has been good dialogue with the Gypsy Travelling community and a lot of positives have come from that. We will visit the north-east early in February.

You are, I think, making wild assumptions that are perhaps based on media perceptions. I hear what you say about the mess that is left when people leave a site. I would say that councils have a responsibility to provide permanent or transit sites, and if they have not done so, the Gypsy Travelling community has little or no option as to where to site themselves and might use an unauthorised site. Therefore, to prevent any unhygienic mess or whatever, there is an onus on the council to provide portalooos or appropriate means of disposing of people's rubbish, as I think

Elizabeth Rhodick pointed out. If that is not happening, we are bringing on a problem. I am not saying that that is up to community councils per se, but I hope that community councils can at least have dialogue with the council, if not the Gypsy Travelling community, to try to address the problem.

I am looking for at least an acknowledgement that Gypsy Travelling people require somewhere to live, although it appears that you have an objection to them living near your communities. Is that right?

James Brownhill: I do not agree that, because we have not had any dialogue with Gypsy Travellers, what I have been saying is based on assumptions and perceptions. What I have been saying is based on direct experience. I explained that we had endeavoured to liaise with the Gypsy Travellers but that that had failed. This is not based on perceptions.

Dennis Robertson: Did you not say that you have had no dialogue with them?

James Brownhill: I said that because they did not take up the invitation. That does not mean that what I have been saying is based on assumptions and perceptions; it is based on experience. As I explained, I have been through the sites after they have left and I have seen what they leave behind. I have spoken to people in the community who have lived close to the unauthorised encampments, as I have, and I have heard what goes on. It is not assumptions and perceptions. I do not take notice of the media because I do not believe a lot of what they say. What I have been saying is not what I have gleaned from the media.

I have explained that a favourable Gypsy Traveller site would be one that was away from the settled community. I am not talking about nimbyism; I am talking about the settled community, not my community. The best solution, after dialogue, would be for the site to be some distance away from the settled community. Kenneth Johnstone said that the permanent site in Girvan is in a secluded valley that is slightly away from the settled community.

Dennis Robertson: Is not the statement that the Gypsy Traveller people do not want to be part of and do not want to be near the settled community based on assumption if you have had no dialogue with them?

James Brownhill: I did not say that the Gypsy Travellers do not want to be near the settled community.

Dennis Robertson: I will check the *Official Report*.

Kenneth Johnstone: You are talking about not having dialogue, but I have not had dialogue with

the people at the bottom of my street, whom I do not know. Why would I go and have dialogue with them? I have had no problem with them and I have no problem with them. Why should I go and have dialogue with them?

Dennis Robertson: I appreciate the fact that Girvan has a permanent site and that it seems to be a very settled community. However, I suggest that the council has a responsibility to have liaison officers or site managers—

Kenneth Johnstone: There is a site manager.

Dennis Robertson: Fine—that is absolutely perfect. I would hope that councils would have the appropriate liaison officers to enter into dialogue and engage with the Gypsy Travelling community and then engage with settled communities. Would you say that perhaps a way forward is to have a liaison officer to engage with the settled community and the Gypsy Travelling community so that the communities can try to understand each other's fears, aspirations and needs?

Kenneth Johnstone: I think that we have to manage the situation. Several years ago, a Travelling community arrived at Maidens, which is 7 miles from Girvan, and South Ayrshire Council offered them medical treatment and refuse collection before they moved on. The site was left quite clean.

Dennis Robertson: People are entitled to medical treatment and so on anyway.

Kenneth Johnstone: Yes, but I have read in some of the committee's earlier reports that they have not been getting those services.

Dennis Robertson: Absolutely.

Christopher Ahern: I started off the session by saying that I spoke to the Travellers in our area and that they were very pleasant. I had great conversations with them and found out what they wanted, what they thought about the area and why they had to choose the particular areas that they did. The fact that, when they left, they left the caravan behind and it took two weeks for the council to get rid of it, is another matter. There are also groups that use the other site where we are, which is at the corner of two footpaths and a football pitch. That is not an appropriate site even for temporary accommodation, for people parking cars or for somebody putting up a tent or anything, be it members of the settled community parking their cars or kids pitching tents. It is certainly not a suitable area for caravans.

I have sometimes found them intimidating as I walk past them when taking the dog out for a walk and I would not want to talk to them while they had their dogs there as well. However, when I have had the opportunity, I have spoken to them. The community policeman in the area speaks to all the

groups regularly when they come round. He comes to our monthly community council meetings, which are open to everyone, and passes on their comments.

10:30

Elizabeth Rhodick: A lot of councils look on this as a problem. I never say that I have a problem; I always look for a solution. So there is never a problem in my life—there is a problem looking for a solution, but not a problem as such. That is the problem with the councils. The problem gets worse—it is like a dog with a bone: the council gnaws away at it, rather than side-stepping it and looking for a proper solution. Whether it involves Gypsy Travellers, any ethnic minority or any person, they should think, “There’s no problem; there’s only a solution.” Sorry, but that is my ethos in life.

Dennis Robertson: Do you accept that there are not enough sites for Gypsy Travellers?

Elizabeth Rhodick: Yes.

Dennis Robertson: Thank you.

The Convener: Do you have any further questions, Dennis?

Dennis Robertson: No.

The Convener: I will bring in Siobhan McMahon. John, do you want to come back in after that?

John Mason: No.

Siobhan McMahon: I want to follow up on the last point about the lack of provision for sites. Mr Ahern gave an example of Gypsy Travellers pitching up at a site that might not be appropriate. Obviously, I have not discussed that with them, but they, too, might think that it is not appropriate and might want to be settled somewhere else when they go. It is about getting appropriate sites. If you have read the reports that we were discussing, you will know that we are looking to the planning process in that regard.

I do not sit on a community council, so I have a question about the role of council liaison officers. When there is a planning application for a permanent site—we talked about Perth possibly having one—does the liaison officer come to your meetings to discuss it so that you can go to the community and ensure that everyone is aware of it? What kind of objections would be made? Would they be solely about an area not being practical for a permanent site, or would the objection be that, given previous problems, the site would be too close to houses and schools? For example, you outlined earlier the lack of sanitation and so forth on sites. Are those the reasons for the opposition to sites? Have there been applications in the past

that your community councils have looked at and taken a view on?

Christopher Ahern: The Double Dykes site does not come within our community council boundary—it is about a mile outside it—but the liaison officer for the site liaises with any transit camp in the Perth district, although I do not think that he covers the one in Kinross, as that is too far away. He was put in a number of years ago purely to manage the Double Dykes site, but his remit now is to manage all the other sites as well.

We had five sites in Perth. One was on the South Inch, which was totally inappropriate because that is a public park; one was in the Broxden area, which has now been built on for housing; one was on the site for a new dental hospital, which is now up, so they have moved away from there; and one was on the Arran Road industrial estate, which is where I had a dialogue with the Travellers. However, that site is getting built on and has now been bought and is privately owned. It is going to be a building site, so they cannot go there either. That leaves just one site, which is on the corner of two footpaths and a football field, so it is not appropriate.

It would be great to have another transit site but, as I explained, even the Gypsy Travellers on the Kinross site say that the site is dirty. I was trying to find in a previous *Official Report* what was said by Fiona Townsley, one of the Gypsy Travellers from the Double Dykes area, because even she has said that they have different types of people, as in any society. There are people who will keep the place clean and people who make a mess. You cannot control it—those who go to a temporary site for two weeks might leave it a mess or might leave it clean.

As I said, I had a really great conversation and interacted well with the guys who parked down at the end of Arran Road. However, when they left, one of them left his caravan behind.

Siobhan McMahon: I understand that, but let us look at the other side of the coin. If you are continuing to develop land that has been used in the past, where do Gypsy Travellers go? That is the problem that we are trying to examine. Earlier, we were given the example of the power station. I do not think that, given the option, anyone would want to pitch up beside a power station. Those are the differences and the engagement that we need to have. Indeed, that is what Fiona Townsley said. We are all different—you are all different—and those differences are recognised in communities. However, if a site cannot provide clean water or a caravan without smashed windows, why would anyone stay there? You would not ask anyone to do so. I do not understand why the current view—I am not saying that it is your view—tends to be that that is okay. It is not.

Christopher Ahern: I cannot speak for other areas of the country, but I know that in Tayside TAYplan is trying to cope with the increase in housing that the Scottish Government says the council must provide. Any available land has been put aside for development. I had a look through the plan—it is a couple of inches thick—and any spare land around the villages, the towns or the cities is being put up for development. If that land is suitable for development and houses are being built on it, where else are you going to put them or build temporary sites? All the sites have been taken up.

Siobhan McMahon: I would argue that a temporary site is housing—we could have that argument. It would be building new houses for people, just a different type of housing.

Christopher Ahern: Build them houses, then.

Siobhan McMahon: No, no, no.

Christopher Ahern: If the local authorities have mapped out all the areas to fit in with the housing that they have been told to produce—

Siobhan McMahon: That is your interpretation of what a house is. You just said, “Build them houses”. If they travel, their caravan is their house.

Christopher Ahern: I was just responding to your point about housing.

Siobhan McMahon: Yes, but we should build sites as houses for them. The site will be their house.

Christopher Ahern: But where is the site going to be built when all the suitable land has been taken up—

Siobhan McMahon: That will be their house.

Christopher Ahern: —to ensure that the council can comply with the housing policy laid down by the Scottish Government? If all the available land has been taken up, where are you going to put the site? The only place you can put it is away from the villages and the towns. All the land around Perth that was available for building on has been put aside in the TAYplan strategic development plan for building—I do not know what to call them now—permanent houses, be they local government or private houses. No suitable land is available for a temporary site.

James Brownhill: That comes back to my point that it is very hard to find a suitable site in a city because the land in cities has been taken up with housing or industry. As I have said—I think that this is the third time now—the optimum site is not right next door to the settled community but somewhere remote. If there are no such remote areas in a city, you are not going to be able to find a site there. Hopefully, you might be able to find a site outside the city boundaries in a more remote

rural or country area that would be suitable for Gypsy Travellers.

The comment about putting them in houses might have been a bit flippant, but we have heard how they have been settled in houses for 20 years in Lochgilphead—

Elizabeth Rhodick: I am sorry, but I must correct you. They have been settled on the Lochgilphead site for 20 years but the new houses were built after they put in an application and were successful. They have not been in houses for 20 years; they have been in the area for that time.

James Brownhill: I stand corrected—and it is a very valid correction. Nevertheless, it shows that within the Gypsy Traveller community there is a diverse range of needs, requirements and expectations. The council should be trying to provide the Gypsy Traveller community with the kind of package that I mentioned earlier, whether it be permanent housing, permanent sites where they can stay in their caravans for however long or temporary halting sites. There is no single solution; there needs to be a complete package.

Siobhan McMahon: I agree. That applies to the whole community. However, I am interested in your remark that the best solution is a rural site. Where does that view come from? Is that your opinion? Is it the view of the community council? Has it come from engagement with Gypsy Travellers?

James Brownhill: No. As I have said, I have never had any direct verbal engagement with Gypsy Travellers.

Siobhan McMahon: How, then, can you state that the best solution for Gypsy Travellers would be a rural site?

James Brownhill: I know from reading that they like the family around them and their seclusion, and we have heard today how a remote site is a successful one. In my experience, if we get the various organisations or groups together, including the settled community, we will find that the settled community does not want Gypsy Travellers on its doorstep.

The Convener: Alex Johnstone has a supplementary question.

Alex Johnstone: It is more a comment than a question. At least a couple of our witnesses have been getting a bit of a hard time. From my experience of living in Stonehaven, which is a community that has suffered from illegal encampments in the town on a number of occasions, I know that it is important that a broad range of views is presented to the committee. I therefore welcome the fact that people have come here today and expressed views that are regularly expressed to me by people who live at close

quarters to illegal encampments, in particular. You expected to get a hard time when you came here, but I hope that you will feel that your contribution has helped us to make some progress in the inquiry by ensuring that we have a good, broad understanding of the problems from every perspective.

The Convener: Does Dennis Robertson have a supplementary question?

Dennis Robertson: Yes. I will be brief.

If people do not have an authorised place for their site, the terminology that the committee tends to prefer is “unauthorised site”.

My supplementary question, on the perception of “rural” and “remote”, perhaps reflects Siobhan McMahon’s point of view. I hoped that we would look at ways of integrating our Gypsy Travelling communities into our settled communities, as perhaps has happened at Lochgilphead. Integration seems to be a better way forward in understanding. People are transient—they come and go—but I would hope that integration would give a better understanding of people’s lives and culture. The situation may be more acceptable to communities if they understood through integration instead of Gypsy Travelling communities being kept remote.

Elizabeth Rhodick: We are very fortunate in Lochgilphead, where I am classed as an incomer because I have been there for only 30-odd years. There is a mental hospital in Lochgilphead, so people have been used to prejudices and so on. People there are more accepting of Gypsy Travellers, Polish and Ukrainian people—you name it—and people from the mental asylum. Lochgilphead’s populace is a bit more understanding and accepting of people’s traditions and ways of life. In that respect, Lochgilphead has had a bonus for those other communities.

Dennis Robertson: I, too, live in an area—Stonehaven—that is quite used to having unauthorised sites, and I am certainly aware of the other sites in Aberdeenshire.

Kenneth Johnstone: I am not quite sure what you mean by the integration of people who travel. Surely, integration would mean that people would become part of the community, but people will not become part of a community if they keep moving on and somebody else takes their place.

Dennis Robertson: We must understand that a lot of Gypsy Travelling people become fairly permanent. As we have heard, a lot of people who live in Lochgilphead are fairly settled. Although some people will travel, they often do so during the spring and summer months and come back to permanent sites.

10:45

The Convener: We heard from Gypsy Travellers that they have a fairly fixed travelling pattern. In my view, that should make it easier to integrate them or reach some kind of understanding with them. They may be in an area for three months and then move on, but they come back. Although Gypsy Travellers may stay in an area for a fairly short time, from what we have heard they are fairly regular visitors to that area. I expect that, over time, it would be fairly easy to build up a relationship with the people who kept coming back to the same area. That is one of the points that Dennis Robertson was trying to make.

James Brownhill: Maybe I was taking integration too literally. We have heard that integration at Lochgilphead has occurred over a period of 20 years. I can see that happening and feel that it is definitely a way forward if Gypsy Travellers who want to integrate into a settled community can do so, but it will be harder for those who want to keep travelling. They cannot travel and be integrated, so to speak. Integration is the way forward, but it will take time. It is not a solution for this year or next year, but we need a solution for this year and next year that will lead towards integration over the next 20 years, from the experience that we have had. As with any project, there are short-term, mid-term and long-term goals. I hope that we will achieve integration in the mid term or the long term, but it will not happen in the short term and we need a solution for the challenge—if I cannot call it a problem—that we have right now.

Elizabeth Rhodick: In the olden days, the communities were semi-permanent. They had their set routes and ways to go. They wintered down in a certain area with a certain farmer, on a certain estate or whatever and they did odd jobs to pay for their campsite. Now that has changed and even the work that they do on farms and estates has changed. The Gypsy Travellers’ work is different, but they still visit the same areas regularly. My husband’s uncle used to look forward to the same Gypsy Traveller family coming every year. They had a whole day with them because they used to collect the white heather from his garden, which the woman would sell at the Cowal games. She came regularly and they had regular routes. That is missing now because they do not have the same places to go—the farms, the estates and wherever they used to stay. I am not saying that that is the solution, but the council needs to stand up and be counted. It should do something to fix the problems.

Sheila Chambers: I certainly do not think that it is an issue to be dealt with by community councillors, who are volunteers. In our area,

people stay temporarily for a fortnight and then, a while later, different people stay for another period. I must say, in their defence, that many of them come for the odd jobs that are given to them by the local community—hedge cutting and so on. They leave the hedge cuttings on the site, but that is beside the point. To a certain extent, the community gives them work, which is why they come. That is how it is. However, I do not think that integration should be spearheaded by community councils; I think that it needs to be spearheaded by local councils, focusing on the permanent sites rather than on the temporary places.

The Convener: What role do you see for community councils? Community councils represent the views of people in their communities.

Sheila Chambers: They do indeed.

The Convener: When Gypsy Travellers are in your community—whether that is for three months, six months or permanently—they are members of your community. How do you represent their views?

Sheila Chambers: There are only temporary, unauthorised sites where I live. There is one authorised site in East Lothian; I do not know whether it has any integration with the relevant community council.

The community council's role is to liaise with the community and to report the community's views to the local council.

The Convener: Is the role not to represent Gypsy Travellers' views?

Sheila Chambers: How can we do that when they are there for only a fortnight?

The Convener: They are still part of your community.

Sheila Chambers: I would be reluctant to go to some of these places to speak with them.

Elizabeth Rhodick: That is prejudice, right or wrong. Community councils should encourage the members of their communities—whether they are Gypsy Travellers, settled people or whatever—to converse, liaise and get on together. It is not a case of them and us; we are all a community together, regardless of whether we are in a community part time or full time.

Kenneth Johnstone: As I said, I have never really had any dealings with the Gypsy Travellers on our permanent site. However, I would like to think that, if anyone from that community came to the community council for help on something, I would deal with them in exactly the same way as I would deal with anybody else.

Christopher Ahern: I agree with Sheila Chambers. If somebody is in an area for a fortnight or three or four weeks, I do not see how we can express their views. They are there, then they have gone.

We have regular meetings, which are advertised on noticeboards. People are entitled to come along to a meeting; in fact, we hold our meetings about 50 yards from their unauthorised encampment. They can come along, but they have never appeared. We have invited people from the permanent site, which is outside our community council remit, but nobody has ever turned up.

The Convener: No committee members have further questions. Would any of the witnesses like to make points that they feel have not been raised in the questions that we have asked?

James Brownhill: I have a point, which is probably for Siobhan McMahon, although I am not sure of her remit. It is always assumed that the incumbents on the unauthorised campsites in Aberdeen city are Gypsy Travellers—I have used that term correctly throughout the meeting. Gypsy Travellers are an ethnic group, which does not include new age or occupational travellers. There appears to be no check on whether the people on the unauthorised campsites are genuine Gypsy Travellers or whether they are new age travellers or occupational travellers.

The problem that we have discussed today might therefore not be as large as we think. I am not saying that every encampment is 100 per cent new age and occupational travellers; I do not know the percentage, but it is not 100 per cent and it is probably very small. However, that is never checked. We have spent time today on discussing a problem whose magnitude we do not know, because we do not know how many of the people are true ethnic Gypsy Travellers and how many are new age or occupational travellers. How do we get round that one? I do not have a clue.

Siobhan McMahon: The point is not specifically for me to address; it is for everyone. We have heard about the issue in evidence; you have turned the coin the other way. We have heard evidence that people are asked to prove to a general practitioner or whatever that they are a Gypsy Traveller. Why should they be asked that? That is the key to the matter. Some of us are in ethnic groups—be they Italian, Irish or anything else—but no one asks us about that, unless we are completing a census form.

I understand what you say. An ethnic group is protected, and I asked the same question about those sites. Mr Ahern talked about children from the settled community pitching tents. There have to be checks and balances.

I do not know how we could distinguish between the two groups that you mention, to be perfectly honest, because to do so would be to go with a stereotype, a prejudice and a chip on the shoulder. However, we can explore the matter in a bit more detail, with the convener's permission. You have turned the coin over on something that we have been looking at another way. I am more than happy to pursue it, but I do not have the answer.

James Brownhill: To assess the magnitude of the challenge of Gypsy Travellers, we need figures.

Siobhan McMahon: You said that you have read the report, so I am sure that you are aware that we do not know the numbers of Gypsy Travellers because they do not report the fact that they are Gypsy Travellers for fear of people expressing opinions and taking action against them because of that.

Gypsy Travellers are fearful of presenting themselves as such, so even the Government's figures show, we believe, only 10 per cent of what is happening throughout Scotland. The ethnic grouping is wider than has ever been reported, so I accept that others are not included in it and that they might be at the temporary sites.

That takes us back to the mapping and scoping exercise. Because we think that the ethnic grouping is bigger than has ever been reported, much more work must be done. I do not have the answer on how we do it, but I am sure that the committee will consider that.

The Convener: The committee has posed that question. The Government has a figure for the number of Gypsy Travellers in Scotland, but the Gypsy Travellers themselves and Minority Ethnic Carers of People Project tell us that there are far more. However, it is difficult to get an accurate figure for the number of Gypsy Travellers. One of the reasons that we felt a mapping exercise would be beneficial is that it would help us to better assess the exact number of Gypsy Travellers.

James Brownhill: Can anyone advise me why the twice-yearly count of Gypsy Travellers that the Scottish Government published until 2008-09 came to an end and whether there is anything to replace it?

In the recent census, I think that people were allowed to put their ethnic group down as Gypsy Travellers, which is a completely different figure. Will the 2011 census provide us with any information?

The Convener: The Gypsy Traveller ethnic grouping was included in the census. Off the top of my head, I cannot tell you why the twice-yearly count came to an end, but I will find out.

Would any of the other witnesses like to make any comments that they feel have not been covered in our questions?

Elizabeth Rhodick: I repeat that we are all human beings, regardless of whether we are Gypsy Travellers or from other ethnic minorities, and we should all respect each other.

If other witnesses feel intimidated, they should just calm down and say, "Hello, how are you?" They will probably find that they will be able to get something. Others have said that they cannot go into sites because of intimidation but, if they are not intimidated, Gypsy Travellers cannot intimidate them. I appeal to them to try to say, "Hello, how are you?" They should not say, "I am here to see what a mess you've made," but, "I'm here to see how you are."

I am sorry, that is just one of my bugbears.

The Convener: Thank you very much for that.

I thank our witnesses for coming along and giving us their evidence. It has been a useful evidence-taking session and we have got a lot from it. It will help us in our further deliberations on Gypsy Travellers and where they live.

That concludes our meeting. Our next meeting will take place on Thursday 17 January and will include oral evidence from voluntary organisations and public service providers on where Gypsy Travellers live.

Meeting closed at 10:59.

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