

MINISTERIAL WORKING GROUP ON GYPSY/TRAVELLERS: TAKING ACTION TO TACKLE POVERTY AND SOCIAL EXCLUSION

Introduction

Before I took on the role of Race Equality Framework Adviser I identified a number of key issues:

First: the life chances of Gypsy Travellers - the most marginalised community in Scotland - should set the barometer for judging how fair and just Scotland is.

Second: to shift the needle on the barometer we have to address the widespread exclusion, deprivation and social antipathy that Gypsy Travellers face.

Third: to do this requires leadership, focus and accountability - in other words a new set of governance arrangements - which we now have in the shape of the Ministerial Working Group on Gypsy Travellers (MWG).

I will briefly comment on the direction of travel of the Working Group, and then talk about the link between MWG and the Poverty and Inequality Commission.

Progress to date

I can see little evidence that policy responses to the recommendations in the two Scottish Parliament Inquiry Reports have had a positive impact on the GT community.

That said there have been recent developments which demonstrate that progress/change is possible when different approaches are taken, for example:

Education: The new programme of work to support the flexible delivery of education to GT communities through the Scottish Traveller Education Programme. The new National Co-ordinator Post and the creation of regional hubs to share and systematise best practice should avoid the short-termism that has characterised many previous Gypsy/Traveller projects.

Human Rights: the explicit recognition of the Gypsy/Traveller's right to travel is significant because it makes clear that Gypsy/Travellers' experience must be viewed in the light of human rights considerations. There has also been cross party support for mapping and opening up traditional stopping places.

Participation: Support for a stronger community voice in helping to shape policy through for example the Young Gypsy Traveller Assembly, the Gypsy Traveller Women's Voices Project, as well as the West of Scotland GT Forum - is a welcome development . However, it will take time and resources to support and nurture effective participation of Gypsy/Travellers in policy, planning and service delivery.

Overall: There is still a long way to go before we can see improvements made to the daily lives of Gypsy/Travellers. So, moving forward, my advice to the MWG is that it must ensure that Scottish Government policies/services in particular those designed to alleviate poverty and inequality are a) reaching b) meeting the needs of this community: **It won't happen automatically.**

Link between Poverty & Inequality Commission and MWG

An effective way to do this would be to adopt the general principles that the Poverty & Inequality Commission set out in its advice to the Scottish Government in relation to the Child Poverty Delivery Plan, and apply them to all four workstreams

First Principle: Linking actions to impact

My view is that in all 4 MWG work streams:

- There should be a small number of impactful actions that can be measured and tracked.
- The MWG should be asking how do we measure progress and monitor the impact of specific actions in other programmes of work (such as the Child Poverty Delivery Plan) on the Gypsy/Traveller community, so that we can demonstrate they are effective in reducing poverty in this community.

Second Principle: Cross-portfolio approach.

- The cumulative/complex nature of poverty - particularly as experienced by the Gypsy/Traveller - community requires an integrated policy response within and across portfolios.
- So for example if it is hard to maintain regular employment or increase the uptake of benefits because Gypsy/Travellers are constantly moved on because of insufficient site provision, then addressing income insufficiency would require a joint response from Employment, Social Security and Housing .

Third principle: Focusing on people as well as numbers.

- The GT community in Scotland is numerically small, and not always visible. It is a community at high risk of extreme poverty, which also experience barriers to accessing information, services and support.
- The challenge for the MWG is to ensure that Gypsy/Traveller needs and routes out of poverty are reflected in the key income and poverty related programmes such as the Fairer Scotland Action Plan, Child Poverty Delivery Plan, the new Social Security Agency and in the recently published draft Poverty and Inequality Commission's Work Plan on which the Commission is currently consulting.

Fourth Principle: Reducing the poverty gap in the longer-term.

The evidence shows that poverty and inequality passes from generation to generation. If the Scottish Government is serious about improving the lives of Scotland's Gypsy/Travellers in Scotland, the MWG will need to oversee action to break the inter-generational cycle. This means doing things differently. It means that the Status Quo is not an option, that the current reliance on guidance and monitoring through dialogue has not proved successful in achieving the positive outcomes for Gypsy/Travellers in Scotland.

Therefore any proposed action in the four workstreams must be able to answer the following question:

1) what difference will this action / policy make to the circumstances of Gypsy/Traveller communities and 2) what needs to be done differently to ensure that it reaches and meets their needs.

Two final points:

Professor Crenshawe (a New York based Law Professor) suggests that designing services and policies for those groups who experience the greatest disadvantage would have the effect of creating better services for all. I buy that.

I think that if services are better equipped to meet the needs of Gypsy/Travellers they will also benefit other people who may have:

- low rates of literacy
- little confidence in 'officialdom'
- high levels of mobility
- difficulties with school attendance (due to mobility, illness, rurality etc).

And my final point is that we have a real opportunity right now to make genuine improvements in the life chances of Scotland's Gypsy/Travellers – to shift the needle on the barometer. There is the political leadership at national and local level, emerging community voices, and raised expectations. The choreography feels right. But like Madeleine Albright I am an optimist that worries. At the moment, it's still very much all talk, and it needs to be about action and impact. To waste this opportunity would be regrettable.

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October 2018