COSLA

COSLA's second response to the Public Petitions Committee – Petition PE 1364

Thank you for the opportunity to have further input to this debate.

The specific questions to COSLA following the Public Petitions Committee's meeting are:

1. What is your response to the points made by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (PE1364/C) and what action(s) will you take to address these?

2. How many Gypsies and Travellers' encampments were there:
a) 20 years ago;
b) 10 years ago; and
c) now.

Answer to Question 1

COSLA is currently in discussion with the Scottish Government to identify and develop good practice around the issues raised in this petition. With this, we are building on the work that is ongoing in the northeast of Scotland. Our elected members in the Community Wellbeing and Safety Executive Group will be considering the issue in the near future.

Given that this is not just an issue for local government, we also hope to work with the EHRC and other relevant Community Planning Partners, especially so we can look at the more difficult issues.

We are fully aware that we are not dealing with a homogenous group when it comes to travellers/gypsies etc. Moreover, we need to find a balance between interim solutions and the long-term agenda.

The particular pressures experienced in the northeast are due to a very specific set of circumstance. Therefore, while we support a review of current guidance and legislation, we must avoid a one-size-fits-all response for across Scotland.

All local authorities grapple with balancing the differing needs and issues in their communities on an ongoing basis. This becomes even more difficult as resources are becoming scarcer.

With regard to more specific issues raised the submission of EHRC we wish to point out as follows:

Para 2
We agree that interests need to be balanced to avoid future tensions.

Para 3
We agree that the needs of the different communities need to be balanced, in the short and long term, and that there needs to be a longer term approach to management and supply of sites. As we stated in our earlier submission, COSLA supports identifying a range of options for the provision of land for Gypsy Traveller sites, including private sector land such as farm

land. However, we must also be mindful of the need for access to facilities such as schools and infrastructure.

Para 4, 5, 6
This would be picked up by the work on developing good practice.

Para 6
Again, we stated in our earlier submission that COSLA supports identifying a range of options for the provision of land for Gypsy Traveller sites.

Para 8ff
Issues around the legal definitions etc would be picked up by the work on developing good practice.

Para 15
As above stated, while we support a review of current guidance and legislation within the work of developing good practice, we must avoid a one-size-fits-all response for across Scotland, when this is currently and predominantly a localised issue.

Para 19ff
We will work with the Scottish Government and other partners towards improved outcomes. Identifying suitable land is an important issue here.

We are aware that it will require commitment and time from all sides to move forward, and solutions can not be found overnight. While the media might sometimes present a very different picture, councils are working closely and on an ongoing basis with the relevant groups and communities to achieve better and more sustainable outcomes.

Over and above this, I would like to reiterate our previous main points.

- There should be a review of existing guidance and legislation to ensure parity of rights for both Gypsy Travellers and settled communities.

- There need to be interim outcomes for specific areas, such as Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, determined locally, where there are currently pressures.

- Strategic measures for the longer term need to be identified to reduce the likelihood of unauthorised encampments.

Answer to Question 2

We do not hold such figures.

Silke Isbrand
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