

Civil Society Monitoring: The United Kingdom

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The UK Situation – we have no integration strategy!

In evidence to the House of Commons European Scrutiny Committee, (11 May 2011) the then Minister for Housing and Local Government, Grant Shapps MP, argued that a National Roma Integration Strategy was not relevant for the UK because a separate strategy might impose unhelpful targets and be a burdensome reporting requirement. The European Commission assessment of the UK submission to the EU Framework for NGRTIS, identified a range of gaps in the UK submission including a lack of quantifiable targets and gave 18 out of a possible 22 negative indicators. The Government still appears to be reluctant to introduce targets.

The lack of a National Integration Strategy has had serious consequences according to Baroness Whitaker, Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for Gypsies, Roma and Travellers: “looking at the national situation there has been very, very little change in outcomes for Gypsy, Traveller and Roma children and adults on health, on housing, on education, criminal justice in so far as we have the figuresthere’s no systematic national approach there are just a few good initiatives here and there, some from Local Authorities, some from voluntary groups and very few from the Government. So I think that the European Commission’s got it right in their opinion of how we are doing”.

In England the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) is the national contact point and has led on coordination of different departments. It provides the secretariat for the Cross Government Ministerial Working Group on Gypsy and Traveller Inequalities (CMWG) established by the Government. Within this Department, the Integration and Community Rights Directorate hosts the civil servants that lead on Gypsy and Traveller issues. Concerns have been expressed by third sector groups that Gypsies, Roma and Travellers come under the portfolio of responsibilities held by Brandon Lewis MP, Under Secretary of State at DCLG, which also includes local government, fire and resilience, high streets, town centres and markets and community pubs. Civil Society representatives have expressed a desire to see these communities come instead under the ministerial race equality portfolio in DCLG. The CMWG issued an interim report on progress in 2012. However little progress has been made to reduce inequalities and improve integration for Gypsy, Irish Travellers or Roma communities across the UK.

We have concerns as to the progress, effectiveness and allocated resources attached to the CMWG 28 commitments and its lack of strategic thinking or support for targeted measures. There have been repeated and numerous requests by Gypsy, Traveller and Roma groups for the Government to develop an ‘Integration Strategy’ and thus rethink its policy direction, but these have been rejected in support of what the Government claims is a mainstreaming approach. It is a cause of concern that the CMWG does not contain direct community representation and or more actively involve the communities in the design and delivery of their work. A major concern of respondents to the evaluation was the failure to engage with the communities and develop a strategy. The CMWG met, with little or no input from NGOs or other stakeholders, before producing a Progress Report in April 2012. Since then we have had the following exchange in the House of Lords on 11th November 2014:

Lord Avebury (Liberal Democrat)

To ask Her Majesty's Government what actions have been taken in pursuance of the commitments undertaken by the Ministerial Working Group on tackling inequalities experienced by Gypsies and Travellers in their progress report of April 2012; and what further meetings have taken place, with what outcomes, since that date.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon (Conservative)

The Ministerial Working Group on Gypsies and Travellers was convened as an ad hoc meeting to discuss inequalities experienced by the Gypsy and Traveller community. This working group resulted in the publication of a progress report which included 28 commitments made by the Departments represented on it, with the aim of helping mainstream services work more effectively with Gypsies and Travellers.

Since the report, Ministers have not needed to meet to implement the agreed policy, as this has been delegated to the Civil Service. There have been regular meetings between Gypsy and Traveller organisations and officials across Whitehall to discuss the progress made against the Government's commitments, and wider action to improve the social outcomes of Gypsies and Travellers. We intend to publish a follow up report in due course.

In other words as well as having no Integration Strategy the UK Government have failed directly to assess progress against their 28 commitments, leaving this to Civil Servants.

What did the evaluation find?

The Civil Society Monitoring indicates that there are a number of policies being implemented by the Coalition Government which run counter to the aims and objectives of the EU Framework for National Gypsy, Traveller and Roma Integration Strategies and increase the likelihood of exclusion. It is important to clarify that Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities have evolved independently and the needs of Gypsy or Traveller people are not the same as the Roma, however all have similar experience of discrimination, which has often led to exclusion and in the worse cases poverty.

Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities are experiencing serious forms of exclusion across the UK and the administrations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are not doing enough to address inequalities, resulting in social exclusion and increased marginalisation of Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities in the UK.

Engagement, Empowerment and Strategy

Although the Civil Society Monitoring report starts with a note of concern, it is encouraging that in two of the devolved administrations (Scotland and Wales) there is a growing appreciation of the need for a strategic approach and, in some areas, there are targeted and innovative measures. However, despite support for some innovative projects, Northern Ireland needs a broader strategic approach and in England, the 'mainstreaming' approach and the promotion of the localism agenda by the current government has tended to preclude targeted and tailored measures for Gypsy, Traveller and Roma inclusion, as evidenced by an unwillingness to adopt a national strategy. Significantly, the report raises concerns about the lack of funding and support for Gypsy, Traveller and Roma engagement in civil society

The report calls upon the administrations within the UK to enter into a real partnership with Gypsies, Travellers and Roma to form a series of taskforces, to inform and guide future policy to ensure that the community members are seen as equal citizens

Discrimination

The report notes that serious levels of discrimination continue to exist for Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities right across the UK. The UK Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) in 2012 criticised the UK Government for failing to consider how a number of policies would impact on the equality agenda in its spending review and warned that the Government had not fully grasped the requirements of public sector equality duties and that the cumulative effects of policies on vulnerable groups were not considered in a comprehensive way. However, it is notable that the EHRC has had its budget and workforce halved. The reduced scope of the EHRC is impacting negatively on Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities.

Increasing concern has also been expressed by community members and others that political leaders are frequently voicing ill-informed and prejudiced sentiments in the public arena (indeed the launch of the monitoring report and a related report “Experts by Experience” coincided with the revelation that a local Councillor in Maidenhead had suggested that a means to speed up the eviction of travellers from unauthorised sites would be to “execute them”), which act to continue prejudice and discrimination against Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities. The media also plays a prominent role in encouraging such prejudice.

Some of the report’s key findings for specific service areas were as follows:

Education

The Office for National Statistics (2014) revealed that Gypsies and Irish Travellers had the highest proportion of people with no qualifications for any ethnic group (60%) and this raises serious concerns about educational access and inclusion for these communities.

Employment

Analysis by the Office for National Statistics (2014) revealed that Gypsies & Irish Travellers were the ethnic groups with the lowest proportion of respondents who were economically active (47%, compared to 63% for England and Wales as a whole). Only half of those who were economically active were employed (51% compared to 75% for the total of England and Wales). Evidence exists that Gypsies and Travellers in Scotland and Northern Ireland also face high levels of economic exclusion. The report refers to troubling evidence of Roma being exploited in low paid waged employment or within the informal economy. It also notes a lack of targeted and bespoke business and employment support by the Department for Work and Pensions. The Scrap Metal Dealers Act has been the cause of serious concern for many Gypsy and Traveller communities and it is felt that the increased bureaucracy will have a detrimental impact on families within the traditional ‘Traveller Economy’.

The Office for National Statistics (2014) revealed that 20% of The Gypsy and Irish Traveller category were unemployed (compared to 7% for the whole of England and Wales). Evidence exists also that Gypsies and Travellers in Scotland and Northern Ireland experience high levels of unemployment. There is no data on Roma unemployment.

Welfare

The report raises fears that the new bureaucracy and regulations (e.g. Universal Credit) are confusing Gypsies, Travellers and Roma. The benefit cap could penalise those with large families and force some out of social accommodation and back onto unauthorised encampments. Under new tighter rules that came into force on 1 January 2014, all EU migrants will have to wait three months before they can claim jobseeker's allowance and other out-of-work benefits. Concerns have been expressed that these new welfare regulations could force more Roma into dangerous and exploitative work practices within the informal economy and or under the control of gangmasters and other unscrupulous employers. The 'right to reside' and 'habitual residency' tests were referred by the European Commission to the European Court of Justice in 2013.

Health

Significant health inequalities exist between the Gypsies/ Travellers and the general population in England and the only national study ever conducted on their health found that they were significantly more likely to have a long term condition and suffer poorer health and experience an earlier death than the general population. Strong evidence also exists in Scotland and Northern Ireland of poor health outcomes for these communities. There is little research on the health of Roma people within the UK but one study found that the Roma community also had poor physical health, which was worse than amongst other socially disadvantaged and ethnic minority populations in the UK.

Accommodation

It is impossible to overstate the importance of suitable culturally relevant accommodation to the life-quality of Gypsy, Traveller and Roma communities. Many Gypsy and Traveller communities still want to follow their traditional nomadic life but land laws and other policies are limiting their cultural traditions. Under the Housing Act 2004, local authorities are required to allocate land for Gypsy and Traveller sites to meet need but most authorities have failed to comply with this statutory obligation for the travelling population whereas they have done so for the settled population, and since it is against the law for Gypsies and Travellers to occupy land that has not been designated for this purpose, the continued and wilful failure to meet this duty is a key factor in continuing the inequality of approach to meeting Gypsy and Traveller Housing needs that remains prevalent throughout the United Kingdom.

The failure to meet this statutory duty not only discriminates against Travellers in regard to a basic need for settled accommodation, but also leads directly to conflict with the settled population where Gypsies and Travellers find unsuitable land to develop since no land has been allocated for that purpose. This inequality of approach offends against the duties set out in the Equality Act but there is no easy mechanism in which this failure can be addressed by the Gypsy and Traveller Community. Further, approximately a fifth of the Gypsy and Traveller caravan-dwelling community lack access to an authorised pitch (stopping place) and the lack of legal stopping places combined with inadequate and unhealthy official sites, and failure to allocate land where Gypsy and Travellers can develop their own sites, means that many Gypsies and Travellers are often forced into bricks and mortar accommodation. However, for many members of the community, leaving their traditional life behind to move into conventional housing can produce social isolation and sometimes serious psychological and psychiatric problems, due to their cultural aversion to this form of accommodation and

separation from their family and community. Limited UK action on facilitating nomadism is compounded by the fact that the European Union often does not pay full attention to the needs of nomadic Gypsies and Travellers.

The emergence of the Government's localism agenda has led to the abolition of Regional Strategies and the refusal of the Government in England to monitor properly whether local authorities are providing their five-year deliverable supply of sites. Additionally the Government is reviewing site developments even after they have been approved by the planning inspectorate. This is unfair and potentially discriminatory and is causing tension and anxiety for Gypsy and Traveller families.

In terms of positive practice, the Welsh Government has recognised the cultural needs of some Gypsies and Travellers to remain nomadic and they have shown determination to break the negative cycle of conflict and exclusion caused by a shortage of sites but sadly this boldness and determination is lacking in the policies of England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Indeed, a recent ministerial statement (2014) stated that the Government in England wants to consider the case for changes to the planning definition of 'travellers' to consider whether it should only refer to those who actually travel and have a mobile or transitory lifestyle. This announcement was made without any prior consultation with the community and there is a fear that the outcome of the proposed review will be to restrict the rights to culturally appropriate accommodation of community members forced into housing or who had to temporarily cease travelling because of health, education or other pressures and commitments. Such a measure could be in conflict with the European Convention on Human Rights. Gypsy and Traveller civil society groups support a definition based on a hereditary and cultural right and/or nomadism.

While there is little research on the accommodation needs of Roma communities, the report has obtained evidence of the distressing living conditions of many Roma in the UK who are vulnerably housed in substandard private rented sector properties. More local authorities need to use their powers of enforcement against landlords who fail to carry out repairs or who harass their tenants. Many Romani tenants and other disadvantaged groups in the private rented sector would benefit from an efficient and fair system of rent regulation.

Conclusions

Civil Society Monitoring has shown that the UK government has:

Failed on education – 9 out of 10 young people from a Gypsy, Traveller or Roma background have experienced racial abuse and nearly two thirds have also been bullied or physically attacked. This group also have the lowest educational attainment.

Failed on health - Gypsy, Traveller or Roma people die 10-12 years earlier than the general population. Infant mortality is three times the national average.

Failed on accommodation – Local authorities are not supplying sufficient sites. Gypsies and Travellers are encouraged to buy their own land but 90% are refused planning permission unlike 80% of the settled population who get planning consent. Roma are often in poor quality, expensive housing which is overcrowded.

Failed on employment – Many Roma are working below the minimum wage and are often exploited by gang masters. Even qualified people can't get jobs or a better job. Traditional occupations (e.g. scrap metal dealing) are being made more difficult or are disappearing altogether due to the impact of government policies.

The Civil Society Monitoring report contains detailed recommendations. To knock these down to one key message, to end discrimination we need a comprehensive strategy with aims/goals and timelines as well as the political will to implement it.

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