Historical policies impacting Gypsy/Traveller communities, colloquially known as “The Tinker Experiment(s)”

Scottish Government’s response

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Scottish Government
Riaghaltas na h-Alba

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose

This response considers the findings of archival research conducted to explore 20th century policies affecting Gypsy/Traveller communities in Scotland.

This response has also been informed by consultations undertaken with community members who have been affected by historical policies. These engagements have provided further insights into the lived experiences, priorities, and aspirations of those impacted, and have helped to shape this response.

The Scottish Government remains committed to ongoing engagement - listening, learning, and taking action - to ensure that our work with Gypsy/Traveller communities is both visible and effective, and contributes to long-term, positive outcomes for Gypsy/Traveller communities. This response signifies our intent to move forward with transparency, accountability, and a steadfast commitment to equality and inclusion, aligning with our commitments in Improving the Lives of Scotland's Gypsy/Travellers 2: action plan 2024-2026.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to the individuals and organisations that supported us throughout this process. Their thoughtful feedback and guidance have been invaluable. In particular we would like to recognise the community members and campaigners who have long advocated for recognition and change. Their tireless work, willingness to share deeply personal stories, and their aspirations for justice and a better future for subsequent generations have been central to this process and we are deeply grateful for all their efforts.

1.2 Background

The Scottish Government recognises that Gypsy/Traveller communities have faced, and continue to face, significant discrimination. Members of Gypsy/Traveller communities have called on the Scottish Government to acknowledge historic state policies supported by successive UK Government departments (particularly the Scottish Office) in collaboration with Scottish local authorities and the Church of Scotland between 1940 to 1980s (i.e. prior to devolution). These policies, colloquially known as the "Tinker Experiment" and "Tinker Housing Experiments," involved the forced housing of Gypsy/Traveller families in substandard accommodation at sites across Scotland and, in some instances, the forced removal of children from their families and subsequent adoption domestically and overseas.

During the Scottish Parliament's Equality, Human Rights & Civil Justice Committee meeting on 29 March 2022, the then Minister for Equalities and Older People expressed her recognition of the unacceptable historical practices experienced by the Gypsy/Traveller communities in Scotland. In an effort to fully capture and understand the implications of these past actions, and to ensure that communities could share their stories in their own words, the Scottish Government announced that independent research would be commissioned.

To deliver on this commitment, two separate contracts were produced. The first focused on archival research, with the aim of constructing a comprehensive timeline of key events, decisions, and the roles played by institutions and organisations. This work was awarded to the Third Generation Project at the University of St Andrews and the work commenced in April 2023. The report that has been published is the outcome of this research.

The second contract was designed to explore the present-day impacts of these historical policies on Gypsy/Traveller communities, with a particular emphasis on gathering lived experiences from those directly affected. However, despite being advertised twice, no compliant bids were received for this qualitative research. As a result, it was agreed that direct engagement with community members would take place following the completion of the archival research. These engagements were carried out in April and May 2025, with the support of an external independent consultant who was recognised and trusted by the communities involved.

1.3 Definitions

We recognise that 'Gypsy/Travellers' in Scotland are not a single group but are instead comprised of many different individuals, families and groups, each defined by its own history, culture and lifestyle - and their right to self-identify is central to each. We are working with the understanding that, in Scotland, the umbrella term 'Gypsy/Travellers' includes Romany Gypsies, Scottish and Irish Travellers, Highland Travellers, Nackens (Scottish Gypsy Travellers), Nawkens and Nawkins.

We also recognise that the effects of historical policies have not been experienced uniformly across these individuals, families and groups. While some may have been directly affected through the immediate impacts of certain policies, others may have felt the impacts in more indirect but still significant ways. These varied experiences mean that the traumatic consequences of the policies have manifested differently depending on a number of factors. Additionally, we are mindful of the intergenerational nature of these impacts. The outcomes of past decisions can extend far beyond those individuals, families and groups who were initially affected, impacting the lives of subsequent generations through inherited disadvantages or systemic barriers. Understanding and accepting this complexity is vital as we try and move forward together.

We are aware that some individuals impacted by the policies identified in the archival report, and some who were generous enough to share their lived experience, regard themselves as "victims of Tinker Experiment(s)." We recognise and accept that individuals affected by certain policies have the autonomous right to self-identify. While some may choose to identify as "victims", others may prefer alternative terms that better reflect their personal experiences and perspectives. While it is paramount to acknowledge the profound impact of certain policies, we do not use a blanket application of the term "victim" in this response. We will use the phrase "Gypsy/Traveller individuals, families and groups who continue to be affected by historical policies" with the intent to also include individuals, families and groups who identify as "victims of Tinker Experiment(s)."

2. Engagement with Gypsy/Traveller community members in Scotland impacted by historical policies

A key part of understanding and responding to the impact of these historical policies involved more than just archival research - it also required directly hearing from the communities who were affected. Recognising this, a short community consultation was commissioned to engage with members of Gypsy/Traveller communities impacted by historical policies. This engagement aimed to gather their perspectives on how society, and particularly institutions like Scottish Government, can learn from past harms and take meaningful steps forward. These initial consultations were designed to ensure that the response to the archival research report is not only evidence-based but also grounded in the lived experiences and voices of those most impacted.

We fully acknowledge that this was a limited and brief process and does not constitute a full piece of in-depth qualitative research. Not everyone who wished to take part had the opportunity to do so. This consultation represents the beginning of a conversation - an initial step to understand the positions of impacted community members and what they hope to see going forward. This is not the end of the dialogue, and we are committed to continuing these conversations beyond the publication of the report.

The consultation process involved focus groups in Stirling, Dunfermline, and Pitlochry, facilitated by an independent and community-trusted consultant. This approach ensured that discussions were conducted in a culturally sensitive and trauma-informed manner. During these sessions, community members were invited to share personal experiences of the ‘Tinker Experiment’ policies and suggest ways in which Scottish Government and other institutions might acknowledge the past and commit to positive change. The findings from these discussions have been compiled into a final report, ensuring transparency and respect for their contributions.

3. Scottish Government's response

3.1 Response

The historic policies and actions in this report predate the Scottish Government but it is important to recognise that the impacts of these policies are still felt today. It is only by confronting these difficult truths from our past that we can move forward - learning from the mistakes of the past as we work towards a more just and equitable Scotland, one that truly honours and celebrates the rich culture of Gypsy/Travellers. It falls to this generation to state, without ambiguity, that what happened to Gypsy/Traveller communities in Scotland was unacceptable.

This starts with formally acknowledging and publicly apologising for the harm caused to Gypsy/Traveller individuals and communities in Scotland affected by historical policies. It appears that stark prejudice and lack of cultural awareness led to a series of unfair and unjust policies that resulted in children being removed from families and families being forced to live in substandard accommodation and degrading conditions. The trauma that this has caused to individuals, families and communities is significant and lasting.

Furthermore, the Scottish Government recognises that the marginalisation of Gypsy/Traveller communities in Scotland was sustained over centuries and deeply embedded in both legislative frameworks and institutional practices. Beginning as early as the 16th century, various laws and policies - in several instances introduced as welfare or public order policies - had significant impacts on Gypsy/Traveller individuals and communities, and their way of life. These measures reinforced existing stereotypes and prejudice while contributing to the erosion of cultural identity and autonomy.

The report highlights the limitations of relying solely on archival sources as it does not include the lived experiences of Gypsy/Traveller individuals, and we believe this is essential to forming a complete and accurate understanding of the impact of these policies. This is why a short, initial community consultation was commissioned to engage with members of Gypsy/Traveller communities impacted by historical policies. We have published a summary of the results of this consultation along with the archival research report and are keen to continue the conversation to find the best way forward.

3.2 Apology

The Scottish Government acknowledges and unreservedly apologises for the harm caused to Gypsy/Traveller individuals and communities by historical policies formulated before its establishment. While it had no role in these past decisions, the Scottish Government deeply regrets the clear impact these historical policies had and it is whole-heartedly committed to ensuring such mistakes are not repeated in our current and future work. The Scottish Government unequivocally condemn all forms of hatred, discrimination, and prejudice - particularly those that still cause members of Gypsy/Traveller communities in Scotland to feel unsafe, unwelcome, or marginalised in their daily lives or in the expression of their identity and way of life.

3.3 Our ongoing work to improve outcomes for Gypsy/Travellers in Scotland

It is important to recognise that significant progress has already been made on some of the themes identified in the archival research report. Society and institutions have changed significantly over the decades, and we are proud of how far we have come in tackling racism, prejudice, and inequality in Scotland.

However there is still more to do and the archival research and community engagement reports highlight some key themes that remain relevant today.

Accommodation

The report highlights ongoing issues regarding the quality of accommodation offered to Gypsy/Travellers, emphasising the importance of approaching these concerns in a culturally sensitive manner. Under the Gypsy/Traveller Accommodation Fund (GTAF), announced in Housing 2040, nearly £15m has been committed or spent between 2021-22 and 2024-25 to allow Councils to progress their projects for more and better accommodation. Local Authorities identified a need to build experience and skills in Gypsy/Traveller site development. The funding has therefore been focused on a number of demonstration projects in six local authority areas to establish examples of model sites. To drive a significant improvement in the quality of sites, we published an Interim Site Design Guide for Gypsy/Traveller sites, developed in conjunction with local authorities and with input from members of Gypsy/Traveller communities.

Gypsy/Traveller Accommodation Fund investment is improving living conditions for residents and supporting local authorities to meet equalities and human rights duties, as well as building a stronger evidence and knowledge base to inform future projects.

While progress has been made, with improvements noted in some areas, it is clear that more work is needed. Our recent listening exercise revealed that accommodation quality remains a significant issue within communities. As a result, we are committed to further action to ensure that accommodation standards meet the needs of all individuals in a respectful and inclusive manner. This is why:

- An independent evaluation of the Fund and Design Guide is under way. This will gather the key points of learning from the demonstration projects to inform future projects, a final Site Design Guide and policy on Gypsy/Traveller accommodation.
- We committed to take the necessary steps so that funding for Gypsy/Traveller accommodation can be accessed alongside housing under the Affordable Housing Supply Programme (AHSP) from 2026-27 onwards. Funding Gypsy/Traveller Accommodation alongside housing demonstrates a long-term Scottish Government commitment to supporting Local Authorities to meet their duties in relation to Gypsy/Traveller homes and allows Local Authorities to better plan ahead.
- Alongside work to mainstream funding into the AHSP, the Scottish Government and COSLA have agreed to work in partnership to review site standards and align with relevant aspects of housing standards.

Addressing prejudice and inequality

This report sheds light on the widespread and often normalised prejudice experienced by Gypsy/Traveller communities. Through the powerful testimony of community members and those directly affected, it is clear that such discrimination is not just a historical issue but it remains a deeply rooted problem in our society today. Gypsy/Travellers are still one of the groups in Scotland most likely to experience social and educational disadvantage, poor health, and poverty ("Is Scotland Fairer" report).

These voices remind us that prejudice, in any form, has no place in a fair and inclusive society. The experiences shared underline the urgent need for systemic change, greater accountability, and a shift in attitudes at every level. We must do better. Recognising the harm caused by this prejudice is only the first step, it must be followed by meaningful action. This includes challenging stereotypes, confronting everyday discrimination, and committing to long-term efforts that promote understanding, respect, and equity for Gypsy/Traveller communities.

Ensuring public services and support understand, and meet, the needs of Gypsy/Travellers is fundamental in tackling the inequality that Gypsy/Travellers experience. Since the publication of Improving the lives of Gypsy/Travellers: 2019-2021, our first Gypsy/Traveller-focused action plan, we have taken specific actions to improve the lives of Gypsy/Traveller communities in Scotland in key areas like tackling discrimination and improving representation, access to public services and education. Last year, we published a new action plan, Improving the Lives of Scotland's Gypsy/Travellers 2: action plan 2024-2026 - gov.scot, building on the successes we have had to date.

Engagement and participation

- Between 2023 and 2024, we spoke with Gypsy/Travellers across Scotland to ensure their voices were, once again, at the centre of our second national joint action plan. This has been an important listening exercise incorporating more than 10 events in different locations, hearing from over 100 individual Gypsy/Traveller voices. We continue this engagement hosting regular community conversations between Gypsy/Travellers communities, the Minister for Equalities and COSLA's Spokesperson for Community Wellbeing to give community members a platform to raise concerns directly with leaders.

Hate Crime

- The 'Long Shadow of Hate Crime' project, delivered by one of our partners and supported by Scottish Government funding, has contributed to increased engagement and awareness raising on hate crime within Gypsy/Traveller communities.
- We also committed to consult with Gypsy/Traveller stakeholders and reflect the views of Gypsy/Traveller communities in the development of a national resource for local authorities to help address hate crime and strengthen community cohesion at a local level.

Raising awareness

- Annually, the Scottish Government organises events during Gypsy, Roma and Traveller History Month to raise awareness of the culture of Gypsy/Traveller and Roma communities and of the work of partners with elected representatives, stakeholders and members of the public, celebrating Gypsy/Traveller and Roma culture and raising awareness of issues with relevant players.
- As part of the new Action Plan, COSLA is also facilitating a Local Authority Lead Officer Group to provide a forum for sharing information and best practice across Local Authorities and champion work to improve the lives of Gypsy/Travellers.
- Since the beginning of the Scottish Government's Equality and Human Rights Fund in 2021, over £1 million of funding has also been provided to Gypsy/Travellers stakeholders to support the delivery of actions, including delivering workshops to public sector staff to increase understanding of and provide information on Gypsy/Traveller cultural norms, provide professional development and share good practice.

Health services

- Since 2021, over £500,000 has been invested into the Community Health Worker (CHW) programme to support Gypsy/Traveller communities overcome barriers to accessing health and other public services. The programme was recently independently evaluated showing how this community-led approach has been pivotal in reducing health inequalities and promoting culturally appropriate and sensitive care.
- Building on progress made to date, we are now working with health boards and Public Health Scotland to find ways to mainstream the CHW programme across existing health services. Over the coming year, we will consider how to embed CHWs within health care services and build on already existing training for health-care providers focused on cultural awareness, sensitivity, and safety. We aim to ensure culturally appropriate support becomes standard practice, thereby sustaining reductions in health inequalities long into the future.

Mental Health

- We acknowledge there will be a level of intergenerational trauma. This is why we continue to be committed to funding to support the mental wellbeing of children and young people in Gypsy/Traveller communities.
- In 2025-26, we are continuing to provide support to Gypsy/Traveller communities with just under £100,000 to support improved mental health and wellbeing outcomes for children, young people and families from Gypsy/Traveller communities.
- This funding will enhance a 'one door' approach to mental health and wellbeing that links in with locally available community-based support, and provide training to statutory partners to enable them to offer better support to Gypsy/Traveller communities.
- Specific work will also be undertaken to look at providing dedicated mental health support for young carers within Gypsy/Traveller communities, as well as ensuring they are aware of their rights and wider support available to them as young carers.

- Our suicide prevention strategy and action plan is also very clearly focused on tackling the root causes of suicide and concentrating our efforts to support communities at higher risk of suicide including Gypsy/Traveller communities.
- We are targeting suicide prevention training for staff working with Gypsy/Traveller communities to increase their confidence and skills in supporting people at risk of suicide. This will help to deepen understanding of suicide prevention within Gypsy/Traveller communities and to raise awareness of the support that is available.

Education

- A total of eight schools are currently participating in the School Pledge programme – a commitment to improve access, experiences and outcomes in education for Gypsy/Traveller communities. A further four schools will begin the programme in Autumn 2025.
- In collaboration with our partners, we have also distributed over 700 Starter Sacks (containing early learning activities using culturally appropriate pedagogies and links to explanatory videos) to families in 20 local authorities, registering an increased engagement of parents in children's early learning, and improved relationships with families.
- 20 digital transitions sacks have been distributed to local authorities as part of a pilot study, with a further 25 being rolled out by August 2025.
- A consultation has started on a resource to support transitions between primary and secondary schools.
- Through the Anti-Racism in Education Programme, work is being taken forward across four interdependent workstreams related to embedding anti-racism within Scottish education. The programme does not focus upon specific minority groups, however Gypsy/Travellers are included within its remit. Those workstreams are:
    - Curriculum reform
    - Education leadership and professional learning
    - Diversity in the teaching profession and education workforce
    - Racism and racist incidents

Supporting Families

The archival report highlights issues with historic social work policies that led to children being separated from their families. While the scale of this is hard to quantify, it is clear that a lack of understanding and prejudice towards Gypsy/Traveller culture played a role in historic policy and decision making, leading to disproportionate impacts on these communities.

- In 2005 the Scottish Parliament commissioned a report into the historical abuse in residential schools in Scotland between 1950 and 1995. While it is unclear from the records how many Gypsy/Travellers children resided in these schools it seems likely that, as in other areas, there would have been a disproportionate representation within the school population. The Scottish Government has already apologised for the historic abuse of children in these settings and a redress system was put in place for survivors, the details of which can be found here: Redress Scotland website.

- While there is still more progress to be made, our approach to family support has changed drastically. The Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) approach was adopted in 2006 to provide Scotland with a consistent framework and shared language to promote, support and safeguard the rights and wellbeing of children and young people. The provision of multi-agency holistic support wrapped around the needs of the whole family, in line with the GIRFEC approach, understands the wellbeing of children and young people in the context of their network of family and care.
- We recognise that separating families should always be a last resort given the trauma and lifelong impacts this can have. Our investment, systems and infrastructure have shifted from acute intervention to providing the right support at the earliest opportunity, meaning that families that need help get it early, before crisis point. The focus now is away from paternalistic, value-based judgements, to building a network of whole family support to help keep more families together.
- In line with work to keep The Promise, and grounded in the GIRFEC approach, we are committed to working with our partners to deliver a shared and consistent approach to ensure the best possible outcomes for individuals, families and the workforce that supports them. Along with our partners in Local Authorities, Health Boards and the third sector we are working to ensure every family that needs help has access to the right support at the right time. At the core of this work is ensuring that the child is in the centre of the decisions that impact them, supporting them to be raised safely in their own families.

We are focusing our actions to reduce the number of children and young people who cannot safely be cared for at home, and this figure is falling. We have seen an 18.1% reduction in the number of children identified as 'looked after' since 2020. These statistics alone cannot determine whether the experiences of Scotland's looked after children and young people are improving. However, they can help to guide our understanding of where progress is being made, and what areas need further attention. Our latest Scottish Government Promise Implementation Plan Update highlights that a significant amount of progress towards keeping The Promise has already been made, including the incorporation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into domestic law and the launch of the Whole Family Wellbeing Fund.

3.4 Next Steps

This response marks an important first step in addressing the findings outlined in the archival report and in responding to the concerns raised by campaigners and community members who have been impacted by historical policies. Our hope is that this will serve as a foundation for continuing to build trust and fostering renewed relationships with all those who have been impacted by historical policies.

At the same time, we recognise that there is still much work to be done. One of the key areas we must focus on is developing targeted actions to improve cultural awareness and ensure that the next generation is better educated about Gypsy/Traveller cultures.

To this end, we are committed to engaging directly with communities to explore innovative ways to use culture and the arts as powerful tools for education and awareness. By initiating and supporting cultural and art projects, we aim to provide opportunities for the public to learn about and gain a deeper understanding of Gypsy/Traveller culture. These initiatives will help bridge gaps, foster mutual respect, and contribute to a more inclusive society where diverse cultures are celebrated and understood.

Improving the lives of our Gypsy/Traveller communities remains a significant human-rights commitment for the Scottish Government and is crucial if we are to tackle deep-rooted inequalities and deliver a fairer Scotland. The progress we have made since 2019 is testimony to the collaborative work of national and local government, the dedication and tireless efforts of third sector organisations, and most of all, the determination of Gypsy/Travellers to ensure better futures for their communities.

As we look ahead, the Scottish Government is determined to maintain a strong leadership role in advocating for the rights of Gypsy/Traveller individuals and in celebrating the rich history, culture, and contributions of these communities. We are committed to sustained, meaningful action that supports equity, inclusion, and justice at every level of our work.

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