

The Highland Council

Community Safety, Public Engagement and Equalities Committee, 11 June 2015

Agenda Item	4
Report No	CPE 8/15

The Cultural Contribution of Gypsy/Travellers in the Highlands

Report by Carron McDiarmid, Head of Policy and Reform and Graham Watson,
Head of Resources, High Life Highland

Summary

This report accompanies a presentation by Inverness Museum and Art Gallery (IMAG) staff and Essie Stewart, a Gaelic storyteller from a Sutherland Travelling family who has a background in Gaelic and Traveller tradition. The presentation informs Members of a forthcoming exhibition at IMAG. The report provides additional information on the role of High Life Highland in promoting Scottish Gypsy/Traveller heritage and culture.

*'As far as culture is concerned, travelling people are the roots and the heart of the Scottish tree. There are many branches that need putting in their place in Scotland.'*¹

1. Background

- 1.1 On 3 December 2014, the annual [report](#) to CPE committee on Gypsy/Traveller issues in Highland updated Members in relation to the provision of services, and in the context of national policy and the Council's commitments to equality and non-discrimination.
- 1.2 During discussion, Members noted the important influence of the Gypsy/Traveller community to Highland culture and history. A recommendation was made for further work to be undertaken to promote the cultural contribution of Gypsy/Travellers in Highland.
- 1.3 This report provides Members with information on activities that promote the cultural contribution of Gypsy/Travellers in the Highlands, primarily through High Life Highland who deliver a wide range of cultural initiatives on behalf of Highland Council. It accompanies a presentation on a forthcoming exhibition which celebrates Travelling in the Highlands given by Cait McCullagh, Curator - Collections Engagement with HLH at IMAG, and Essie Stewart, a traditional storyteller.

2. National context

- 2.1 The Scottish Parliament's Equal Opportunities Committee has undertaken two recent inquiries focussed on the experiences of [Gypsy Travellers and Care](#)

(2012) and [Where Gypsy Travellers live](#) (2013).

2.2 In response, the Scottish Government is currently working with stakeholders to develop an overarching national strategy and action plan. This work aims to demonstrate leadership to help tackle prejudice and discrimination and contribute towards the Scottish Government equality outcome that: *Gypsy/Travellers experience less discrimination and more positive attitudes towards their culture and way of life by 2017*².

2.3 Introducing a recent set of guidance³ to increase awareness and knowledge of the Scottish planning system and engagement between Gypsy/Travellers and planning professionals, elected members and community councillors, COSLA's Spokesperson for Community Wellbeing and Safety, Cllr Harry McGuigan, recommended that Gypsy/Travellers' unique culture should be celebrated and recognised in Scotland.

3. Terminology and definitions

3.1 Gypsy/Traveller is the broad term for people in Scotland who variously refer to themselves as Travellers, Scottish Travellers, and Gypsy Traveller people. As a generic term, it also encompasses English Gypsies, Irish Travellers and European Roma. The choice of name tends to vary geographically; families with strong Highland connections tend to regard themselves as Travellers.

3.2 Travelling communities in Scotland are, therefore, not a single group and each is defined by their different history, culture and lifestyle. They may share aspects of common heritage. In particular, there is a strong sense of the importance of both extended family networks and the regard for 'travelling' as an integral aspect of their cultural identity, although many Gypsy/Travellers are now "settled" and only travel for parts of the year, if at all. Whether a Gypsy/Traveller family lives a mobile lifestyle or in a house, many families have a strong sense of their identity, of belonging to the community and a strong commitment to the maintenance and development of their Traveller identity, lifestyle and culture.

3.3 Gypsy/Travellers are recognised as a minority ethnic community and are protected by equalities legislation.

4. Background

4.1 Gypsy/Travellers have been part of Scotland's economic and cultural life since at least the 12th century. It is widely recognised that Scottish Gypsy/Travellers have a rich cultural heritage which has long been part of Scotland's wider cultural landscape and which influences Scottish society today, encompassing storytelling, music, trades and crafts, customs and language.

4.2 Most of Scotland's traditional storytellers acknowledge a debt to the traditions of Scottish Travellers⁴. Scottish Travellers are notably recognised for their importance in preserving a heritage of stories and of old ballads, which drew the attention of academic collectors in the second half of the 20th century.

Storytellers such as the late Duncan Williamson, Betsy Whyte, Jess Smith and Essie Stewart and singers such as the late Sheila Stewart and guitarist Martin Taylor have contributed to Scotland's contemporary cultural life. In 1976, the director Timothy Neat, along with Folklorist Hamish Henderson, documented the lives of Travelling People and Pearl Fishers in the north-west Highlands of Scotland in the seminal film 'The Summer Walkers'.

- 4.3** The Council's [Am Baile](#) website contains a valuable and accessible record of Highland's history and Culture. Amongst its collections is found the particular contribution of Highland Travellers to Scotland's culture, giving an insight into the traditional lifestyle of Travelling families in the area through text and photographs. The site notes the essential role of Travellers in the preservation of traditional Gaelic culture and their 'outstanding contribution to Highland life as custodians of an ancient and vital singing, storytelling and folklore tradition'⁵.

The educational resource section on Am Baile includes a range of materials available for teachers to use in the classroom specifically for this subject area.

- 4.4** Additional sources of references to academic articles and other resources related to the culture and heritage of Scottish Gypsy/Travellers can be found on the website of Scottish Traveller Education Programme (STEP). STEP also provides a wide range of materials for teachers⁶.

5 High Life Highland – Collections and promoting culture and heritage

- 5.1** High Life Highland (HLH) has responsibility for conserving and promoting access to the Council's museums' collections. These include items and images that illustrate the distinct cultural contribution of Travellers to Highland life over many centuries. Both the Highland Folk Museum at Newtonmore and the Inverness Museum and Art Gallery museums are visited by Travelling families who are aware that they hold important items from their heritage.

5.2 The Highland Folk Museum:

- 5.2.1** The Highland Folk Museum (HFM) Gypsy/Traveller collection was founded in the 1930s by Dr Isobel Grant and is of national significance. Dr Grant sought to collect and preserve the domestic material culture of the ordinary people of the Highlands, including Travellers – an unconventional approach at a time when most museums collected objects linked to wealth and power.

- 5.2.2** As a result, the artefacts at HFM are examples of some of few of their type in existence today. They include a Traveller's wagon, pearl fishing items and tools, and craft products in silver, horn and tin. These reflect the role of Travellers as itinerant tin and silversmiths throughout the Highlands well into the 19th century and their important contribution to the silversmith tradition of the Highlands.

- 5.2.3** HFM is also an outdoor, living history museum with over twenty historic buildings relocated to, or reconstructed, on site. One such reconstruction is a Traveller's camp that was restored with the help of Essie Stewart, the

renowned traditional storyteller, from a Sutherland Travelling family.

5.2.4 In addition to the material artefacts, the HFM has a library which is open to the public by appointment. The library contains three government department reports into the Traveller community from the late 1960s into the early 1980s and copies of all contemporary publications relating to Traveller life and traditions. Public access computers are also available which allow researchers can access the Am Baile website. Staff at HFM are also available to assist researchers.

5.3 Inverness Museum & Art Gallery:

5.3.1 A particular 'gem' is found in the IMAG collection in the form of a Punch & Judy set which exemplifies the important, and socially valued, tradition of travelling entertainers. The set belonged to a Highland Traveller family, the Morrisons, who took their Punch and Judy shows around the Highlands for over a hundred years in the 19th and 20th Centuries. It is an especially rare exhibit as usually such items would have been destroyed after the death of their owner. The set has also previously been used as the focus for IMAG to work on activities with young Travelling people in Highland, and in partnership with Education staff.

5.4 The Gordon Shennan photographic collection:

5.4.1 The Gordon Shennan collection forms part of the Highland Photographic Archive and includes images of traditional Traveller lifestyles in the Highlands in the early 20th century. Photographs include family groups, a bow tent and musicians. These are also available on the Am Baile website alongside oral history material and images of artefacts grouped into a 'Travelling People' section which can be viewed at this link: [Travelling People](#)

5.5 Libraries:

5.5.1 Publications relating to Traveller heritage are always purchased in multiple copies for Highland libraries and prominently promoted. Staff report that there is always huge interest in them and loans are in great demand.

5.6 Promotion of Traveller Heritage 2015:

5.6.1 **Themed day at HFM:** the reconstructed Traveller's camp at HFM is being refreshed and improved during the summer of 2015. The 'Heritage in Action' programme at the museum has a series of interactive themed days which will include a Traveller themed day, with live storytelling relating to Travellers' culture at the camp.

5.6.2 **'Go Travelling with Punch and Judy':** as part of High Life Highland's Summer Activities Programme, this children's event at IMAG will explain and explore the traditions of travelling entertainers in the Highland focussed around the Morrison Punch and Judy set in the collection.

5.6.3 **'Transitions' Exhibition at IMAG:** This exhibition is the subject of today's presentation to CPE committee. Launching on July 2, it will celebrate Travelling in the Highlands using objects from the IMAG and HFM Collections, and images from the Highland Photographic Archive. The project has been

undertaken by the IMAG team working in partnership with Highland Travellers, Essie Stewart and Alec Williamson, and also with members of the HUG, a collective advocacy group which represents the interests of users of mental health services across the Highlands.

5.6.4 The project has undertaken to research, interpret and share the gifts of Traveller musical and craft making tradition, as well as exploring travelling and journeys. In addition to objects and images from the museum collections, the participants will present their own creative responses, being composed and painted under the guidance of Highland based poet John Glenday and artist Eleanor White. 'Transitions' will show at IMAG from 2 July until the 1 August.

6 Conclusions

6.1 A wealth of valuable reference materials, archives and artefacts records the contribution of Scottish Gypsy/Travellers to Highland culture and including specific information about Highland Travellers. Many are on display in museums in the Highlands and a significant amount of historical information is made widely available online through Am Baile.

6.2 It is also worth noting that previously the museums have collaborated with the Interrupted Learning Development Officer in Education and groups of young Travellers in the area. Together they have worked on projects to research the culture and traditions of Gypsy/Traveller families, exploring and recording what Travelling culture and lifestyle means to them. Both IMAG and Education staff have indicated an interest in exploring opportunities for similar work in the coming year.

6.3 Importantly, there is evidence that the traditions of storytelling and music continue within the Travelling community in Scotland and to influence and enrich the wider culture of the Highlands and beyond.

Implications

- 7.1**
- There are no Legal; Climate Change/Carbon Clever; Resources; Rural; or Risk implications arising from this report.
 - The activities described in the report and today's presentation demonstrate examples of projects that advance equality and foster good relations between different groups and also promote Gaelic culture.

Members are asked to note:

- The valuable work undertaken by HLH staff to conserve and promote the historic contribution of Scottish Gypsy/Travellers to Highland culture, and the current involvement of Highland Travellers in activities.
- The potential for further opportunities for HLH to work with young Travelling people to explore what culture and heritage means to them.

It is recommended that:

- Future annual reports to CPE committee on Gypsy/Traveller issues include updates from High Life Highland on the promotion of the cultural contribution of Gypsy/ Travellers to the Highlands.

Designation: Head of Policy and Reform and Head of Resources, High Life Highland

Date: 02 June 2015

Author: Rosemary Mackinnon, Principal Policy Officer – Equality and Judi Menabney, Principal Cultural Manager, High Life Highland

Background Papers:

¹ Sheila Stewart, MBE, ballad singer and author, taken from 'What a Voice' exhibition, Article 12, Scotland's Young Gypsy Travellers' Lives project

² Scottish Government (2013), Equality Outcomes, <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/People/Equality/EqualityOutcomes>

³ Planning Aid for Scotland (2015), Set of five guides on Gypsy/Travellers and the Scottish Planning System <http://www.pas.org.uk/news/recognition-of-unique-gypsytraveller-culture/>

⁴ Traditional Arts and Culture Scotland (TRACS) <http://www.tracscotland.org/>

⁵ Am Baile, Education: Travelling People http://www.ambaile.org.uk/en/education/travelling_people/index.jsp

⁶ STEP <http://www.step.education.ed.ac.uk/>