

# The Green Agenda: Why the Provision and Development of Gypsy/Traveller Sites in Scotland is a Health Hazard as Much as an Accommodation Priority

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*Issues of environmental justice regarding housing, health, and other public services have been subjected to critical scrutiny in Scotland for some time. However, such concerns have not focused on Gypsy/Traveller communities and their accommodation on local authority and private sites. Politically, the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Scottish Greens have been in favour of providing and funding site/pitch upgrades, including developing new site locations. These suggestions have been controversial, and reactions have been debated, not least by local councillors and the media. Drawing on the work of Kristeva (1982) and Tyler (2013), this paper argues that one explanation for understanding responses to Gypsy/Traveller sites is via the concept of (social) abjection. When examining local contexts, spatial locations, and the environmental circumstances of local authority sites, much work is still to be done in challenging instances of environmental and health injustice and anti-Gypsy/Traveller prejudice in Scotland.*

**Keywords:** Abjection, accommodation, environmental justice, health, Gypsy/Travellers, Scotland, Traveller sites.

## Introduction

‘Given we have known that many sites fail to meet basic living standards for many years, improvements are long overdue, and the new councils elected tomorrow need to step up efforts to improve conditions for Travellers across Scotland. Gypsy/Traveller communities themselves will know best what their communities need, and so it is extremely important that councils work with the community to agree where money should be spent, and that includes recognising the impact of restricting access to sites of historical importance to this community. Traveller communities continue to experience poorer living standards, education, health, and employment, and often face extreme and persistent stereotyping and hostility, and the least they deserve is decent conditions and facilities at the sites they use.’ – Maggie Chapman, Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP) for North-East Scotland and Scottish Greens Equality Spokesperson (Scottish Greens, 2022: np)

In local elections held in Scotland in May 2022, new councils were established. Politically, the Scottish National Party (SNP) have continued their domination of the Scottish political landscape, despite a recent leadership change (Mitchell, 2023) and several internal scandals, including accusations of party financial irregularities (Brooks, 2023). However, since the elections of May 2022, the role and influence of

the Scottish Greens in government has shown that, even as a smaller party, it is still a significant local and national force. Of note, the party returned some thirty-five councillors in those local elections, out of 1,227 in total, (Richards, 2022) and their influence is being noted and felt, especially on issues of social justice and environmentalism. An important factor here, in the context of this paper, is that one of the key points raised by Scottish Greens candidates in their election communications and briefings has been the provision, expansion, upgrading, and development of Gypsy/Traveller sites and pitches in Scotland, including new build sites where they are required (Scottish Greens, 2022). This is a highly unusual, but most welcome, development for a mainstream political party to be supporting Gypsy/Traveller accommodation needs and lobbying the Scottish Government on behalf of a marginalised and oppressed minority population.

Via the May 2022 local elections in Scotland and resultant political shifts and realignments, a spotlight has been illuminated once more on the issue of standards and facilities at Gypsy/Traveller sites in Scotland, as well as their often problematic and hazardous geographical locations. Funding for important site and pitch upgrades and improvements has been provided by the Scottish Government, dating back to 2018-2019, but thus far very limited progress has been made on spending such funds, citing delays due to external factors such as Brexit, COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, and the cost-of-living crisis (Anderson, 2022).

It is still the case, in 2022-2023, that even quite basic living standards are still absent on many Gypsy/Traveller sites across Scotland, especially in more rural locations and areas where a tradition of site provision is sorely lacking (Boyle and Flegg, 2022). This is a reality that has existed for many years in Scotland, as recent historical research by McPhee (2021) and also Taylor (2023) has starkly illustrated. These local and national issues have vital human rights impacts on accessing other public services such as health care, education, and social welfare. Indeed, even trying to ensure basic non-discriminatory access to public toilets has been noted as a problem for Gypsy/Traveller communities, as a recent case in Edzell, Angus has highlighted (Morrison, 2023).

With a specific focus on questions of environmental justice – understood here as being achieving agency for marginalised communities to make environmental decisions that impact on their everyday lives (Schlosberg, 2007) – it is evident that developments in Scottish Government Gypsy/Traveller site planning and improvements from a largely ‘green agenda’ perspective need to take more of a priority. Such developments also illustrate why local politics and resistance to site developments must be contested for environmental health reasons, such as proximity to environmental hazards, noise, and pollution, as much as socio-economic and broader social justice concerns. A central issue here is low capacity on existing sites, and the small number of associated pitches, and this needs to be examined and progress must be made via committed public policy actions at national and local levels. It is evident that relying on voluntary and private sector assistance in the matter of Gypsy/Traveller site provision in Scotland is unwise, and planning legislation is still highly unsympathetic to those extended families who have the means and resources to buy land and establish their own site. As an example, it took the owners of the St Cyrus site, North Esk Park, nearly a decade to obtain even temporary permissions and this was an extremely expensive and frustrating process (Brown, 2021). Indeed, the long-term future of the site at St Cyrus remains uncertain due to flooding risks, and the site has been evacuated in the recent past due to the banks collapsing at the river North Esk (Hempseed and Hamilton, 2022).

In terms of agency in key decision-making processes, the paper argues that site residents need to be much more involved and consulted on how site management, as well as pitch design on individual sites, is adapted and implemented, especially if Scottish Government funding is awarded to local authorities for site redevelopments or the provision of new sites. It is argued that an environmental health perspective on Gypsy/Traveller site provision in Scotland needs to be much more central in a post-COVID-19 climate, and this will dovetail well with a renewed focus on sites as an accommodation priority and how residents are brought into that conversation much more, especially in the context of the Scottish Government (2021a) *Housing to 2040* strategy.

Moving forwards, the paper first draws on the related concepts of abjection (Kristeva 1982), and social abjection (Tyler, 2013) to better understand the reactions to the space and place of Gypsy/Traveller sites, both spatially and in the wider public imagination. Indeed, both concepts are pivotal in allowing for a fuller and more nuanced consideration of how social exclusion, racism, and discrimination are understood and legitimated in the public realm. This conceptual discussion then helps inform the substance of the discussion on Gypsy/Traveller communities in Scotland and recent developments in terms of site provision and their environmental situations, vis-à-vis themes of mobility and marginalisation (Shubin and Swanson, 2010).

### **On Abjection: Theorising the ‘place’ of Gypsy/Traveller Sites and Residents**

Social Abjection in effect ‘scales up’ previous understandings of abjection which centre primarily on individual subjects. My account of social abjection is intended as a theoretical resource which enables us to consider of states of exclusion from multiple perspectives, particularly from the perspective of those groups and populations who are subject to its violent and stigmatising effects. (Tyler, 2023: np)

To better understand how Gypsy/Traveller sites are placed and viewed within the Scottish context – geographically, spatially, and in contemporary public imaginations – the concept of abjection is both helpful and important in this regard. Abjection, principally advanced in critical and literary theory by the Bulgarian-French philosopher Julia Kristeva (1982) refers to a state of ‘primal order’ that falls outside of the usually identified ‘symbolic order’ of any given society and moral norms. In this sense, the ‘abject’ is a fundamentally human response – fear, rejection, othering, racism – to a confusion in meaning and/or distinction of subject and object, or indeed, between self and other. The critical argument here, for the purposes of this paper, is that Gypsy/Traveller sites are viewed as places – of ‘defilement’ – that lie outside of the ‘symbolic order’ of mainstream sedentarist society (McVeigh, 1997). Indeed, as Smith (1996) powerfully argues, abjection is, in a real sense, to be ‘cast off’ and detached from commonly understood and accepted codes of conduct within any given society.

For Kristeva (1982), adopting a post-structuralist analysis that is informed by feminist psychoanalytic critiques of Freud and Lacan, the critical intervention comes via her work *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. The connection and use of abjection here – where the hidden ‘corporeal reality’ collides with the presented symbolic order – offers a way of, at least partly, explaining narratives surrounding matters of identity, culture, and behaviours that ‘challenge and confront’ (Lechte, 1990). In the present example, it is reactions and

commentaries regarding proposed new Gypsy/Traveller site developments that are presented as overtly hostile and discriminatory, coming largely from a place of fear, ignorance, and hatred (Thompson and Woodger, 2020; Holdsworth, 2020, James, 2020). It is also the case that some of the fears on non-Gypsy/Travellers – ‘settled people’ – are connected to the perceived potential and fear of property prices being devalued if a new Gypsy/Traveller site is approved and developed close to their neighbouring estates. This is potentially a factor in such local rejections, alongside broader market-based issues of competition for land from developers, as well as any previous negative experiences of being close to sites and/or roadside camps and issues being raised or noted (Garner, 2019).

In other areas of the social sciences, abjection has been used not just in the context of physical space, place, and location, but also regarding reactions to the human body where it is revulsed – in a sense, where ‘matter is out of place’, to draw a direct connection to the seminal work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas (Douglas, 1966). Such revulsion and disgust services a key psychoanalytic purpose; it protects ‘self’ in the face of the ‘other’ by acts of rejection and casting-off. For Kristeva (1982) herself, this helped to explain such phenomenon as antisemitism or homophobia and to propel the analysis into the realm of cultural studies. More recently, and in looking at a range of examples, including the experiences of the Dale Farm Traveller sites evictions in 2011 in Crays Hill, Essex, Imogen Tyler (2013) understood abjection as a *lived material reality* that requires attention to both understand the motives and intentions of those who abject, the powerful, and ‘others’ who are rendered abjected, due to their situations and circumstances, that is, the marginalised – or, in Tyler’s sociological vocabulary – ‘revolting figures’. Tyler’s influential analysis offers a structural and social dynamic and gives space for a range of perspectives on abjection, not least from those ‘figures’ that are subjected to the detrimental effects by the powerful of processes of abjection (the evictions from sites being the example from Dale Farm).

Moving forward, the proceeding sections of the paper builds on these ideas of abjection, and social abjection, in relation to Gypsy/Traveller sites and their residents in Scotland. We also examine the environmental factors that influence site locations, their standing, and development. It is argued, following Tyler (2013), that historical and contemporary processes of abjection have had a detrimental influence on the material condition of existing local authority sites, in particular, but also in creating serious barriers when trying to win approval for new site developments. Before moving to this discussion, some brief background and context is required regarding current Scottish Government plans for developing Gypsy/Traveller sites in Scotland and how such plans have been impacted by largely external factors, as mentioned previously (i.e., Brexit, COVID-19, austerity and the cost-of-living crisis, the war in Ukraine).

### **Gypsy/Traveller Site Developments in Scotland**

Before discussing recent Gypsy/Traveller site developments in Scotland, it is helpful to provide a brief overview of the population in Scotland, their numbers, and their accommodation types and preferences. The Gypsy/Traveller population of Scotland is a diverse and heterogenous one that speaks a variety of languages across different parts of the country, including groups of Indigenous Highland Travellers, Lowland Travellers, Border Gypsies/*Romanichals*, and Showmen (Clark, 2006). Regarding numbers, a recent briefing paper by the Local Government and Housing Directorate (2022) acknowledges

that the 2011 Census figure of 4,200 people identifying as ‘white: Gypsy/Traveller’ in Scotland is highly likely to be an undercount, as agencies and bodies working closely with the various communities suggest figures closer to 15,000-20,000 people (Shelter Scotland, 2021; Scottish Human Rights Commission, 2023). Unfortunately, at the time of writing, figures for the numbers of Gypsy/Travellers counted via the 2022 Census in Scotland are not yet available. Regarding numbers of sites in Scotland, a Scottish Government (Building, Planning, and Design) study from 2019 (Scottish Government, 2019a) indicated that there were fifty-four sites in total, with twenty-nine public sites and twenty-five private sites identified. Combined, these sites offered 613 pitches. The same study also found that 406 locations in Scotland had been used for roadside encampments (‘unauthorised sites’ in the terminology of the Scottish Government) over the previous three years (2016-2019). In terms of historical trends in site provision in Scotland, there has been a decline in public site provision and more applications for private site developments. In terms of roadside encampments, there has been a relative increase in numbers, and it is interesting to note that this pattern seems to broadly reflect English and Welsh trends (James and Southern, 2019).

In terms of recent site developments, a key element of the Scottish Government Gypsy/Traveller action plan for 2019-2021, and the expanded plan covering 2023, included a new twenty million pound fund to upgrade and improve existing sites, or create new sites, across the country (Scottish Government, 2019b). However, in March 2022 it was reported that none of the money allocated to this accommodation fund had actually been spent by that date (Anderson, 2022). Indeed, Jasmine Anderson (2022), using Freedom of Information requests on behalf of *The Ferret*, was able to determine that as of March 2022 no money had been allocated or transferred to local authorities at that time, even though applications had been received and approved for what were termed ‘demonstration projects’ (that is, showcase sites that would act as examples of good practice and inspiration for neighbouring councils to replicate in their own territories). What was revealing via this research by Anderson (2022) was the fact that the delays were deemed to be largely a result of both the COVID-19 pandemic and the continued impact of Brexit, in terms of impacts on the construction industry and having access to affordable experts, building materials and specialist labour and supplies (Oyegoke *et al.*, 2023). It is the case that during 2020-2022, the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, many councils across Scotland did prioritise emergency repairs and void repair work in terms of their Housing Repair Services. An impact and legacy of this has been that the backlog of ‘non-urgent’ repairs and longer-term works is ongoing and has led to further delays to longer-term projects (Fraser of Allander Institute, 2021).

Unfortunately, such delays to progress in improving Gypsy/Traveller sites, and building new sites, were understandably seen as being yet another delay to long-made council promises to carry out essential works that might improve the available accommodation, and quality of life, across Scotland. Anderson (2022: np) discusses the situation of Scottish Gypsy/Traveller Roseanna McPhee at the Bobbin Mill site in Pitlochry and notes that it is situated near a railway line, next to a former gasworks. Anderson writes:

But years of discrimination, compounded by delays to commitments and pledges to improve the lives of the community, have left several people feeling frustrated and distrustful after experiencing a string of broken promises. Roseanna McPhee has been campaigning for

improvement works at Bobbin Mill, a site in Pitlochry, in Perthshire, since 2010. McPhee said six chalets from Tunnel Bridge caravan park were brought onto the site as ‘an interim measure,’ but have now been classed as suitable long-term accommodation. Perth and Kinross council sent an architect in September last year to visit Bobbin Mill, who said private balconies, roof coverings and paved areas needed to be fixed, but the rest of the plot is in good working order for the next two decades.

What is also concerning, in addition to the delays to the building works, is the alleged lack of dialogue and consultation between the Scottish Government, Local Authorities, councils, and site residents. Off-the-record conversations with community members tend to reflect a general sense of exclusion from the formal processes of consultation and a feeling of ‘not being heard’ in terms of preferences for site design, layout, and other important site services. This is something the Scottish Government is aware of and trying to make good on, via trusted third-sector partners such as Article Twelve and Minority Ethnic Carers of People Project (MECOPP), but there is a long way to go in gaining trust and fulfilling promises of repairs and upgrading pitches and sites.

Other Gypsy/Traveller sites in Scotland reflect similar patterns and experiences, according to Anderson (2022), such as the Double Dykes site just outside Perth. Over many years now, reports have been made regarding health and sanitation issues at this particular site, as well as other structural and environmental aspects that impact on site residents. However, in January 2023 it was reported that Perth and Kinross council had secured four million pounds from the Scottish Government’s Gypsy/Traveller Accommodation Fund to upgrade existing chalets to new energy-efficient accommodation (Flett, 2023). As part of this bid, full and active dialogue with site residents was promised, to ensure the redeveloped site met their needs, including new chalets, energy-efficient heating and hot water systems, utilities connections, fencing and gate security, new road works and paths, Light Emitting Diode (LED) street lighting, improved site drainage, and a developed play park and community garden. Reflecting on the news of the award, Tom McEwan, who is the Perth and Kinross council housing and social wellbeing convenor stated:

The successful bid for this funding is fantastic news for all of the residents at Double Dykes. The existing chalets at the site have been in place for some time and the news we are able to replace them with energy-efficient modern accommodation will be welcomed by everyone who lives there . . . *We will continue consultation with residents to ensure their views inform the plan for the project. We will work closely with people who live on the site throughout the process.* The people who live at Double Dykes are tenants of the council and we have a duty to provide the best services we can for them. I am delighted that this significant funding award will allow us to completely transform the site and improve the lives of our tenants” (Flett, 2023: np)

At the time of writing – August 2023 – work at the Double Dykes site in Perth and Kinross had yet to begin but the proposed redevelopment, based on the draft architectural plans, would make a substantial difference to the quality of life of residents. The focus on active consultation and communication from the council with residents is much welcomed as it would go some way to avoid the mistakes of the past, where needs were often assumed, and then trust would break down when communications were strained due to misunderstandings of what was feasible in terms of budget and time. Similarly, the focus on energy-efficiency and Net Zero plans is a positive development, not only

because of environmental concerns, but also to ongoing Gypsy/Traveller worries relating to the cost-of-living crisis and increased heating bills, an issue that the charity and support group Friends, Families and Travellers found to be a key priority for Gypsies and Travellers south of the border in terms of continued financial exclusion (Friends, Families and Travellers, 2023).

Other local authorities in Scotland to recently apply for site development funds have included Aberdeen, Clackmannanshire, and Fife, and their proposed 'model site' plans all reflect some ambition to create new types of Gypsy/Traveller sites that better meet the needs of site residents in 2023-2024 and reflect contemporary concerns with energy efficiency, health and safety, and Net Zero ambitions. It is certainly the case that other councils in Scotland are keen to learn from these initiatives, to see how they might action their own site plans, within the five-year timescale the Scottish Government has set for the action plan accommodation work. However, set within this context, it is a concern that if 'model sites' are to be regarded as 'learning tools' for other councils to engage with, then the timescales will be lengthy, given the fact not all councils will immediately benefit from the funding and the completion of projects will take time if active consultation with community members and site residents is taken seriously and trust is to be established. In other words, an unintended consequence here might be that Gypsy/Traveller sites in some parts of Scotland will be shining examples of solid community consultation, design best practice, and Net Zero excellence, whereas in other parts of the country sites will remain in poor, hazardous, and abject conditions waiting for promised upgrades that might take a long time to come to fruition. In other words, there is a real danger here of regional and urban/rural inequalities and divisions continuing, especially in parts of Scotland that are poorly served with site provision and related infrastructure (it obviously takes a much longer time to build a new site without planning permission than to upgrade an existing one that has planning permission approved).

Fundamentally, the announcement of the twenty million pound Gypsy/Traveller accommodation fund by the Scottish Government is a positive recent initiative, building as it does on existing funding that Local Authorities have access to that have sites in their local areas. Further, it is important that so-called 'demonstration projects' are highlighted and showcased, to give examples of what model sites look like, as they relate to the Scottish Government 'Housing to 2040' principles and acting as inspiration to other Local Authorities (Scottish Government, 2021a). There is just concern here about ongoing funding, the timescales, and uneven development plans across the network of sites in Scotland.

### **Locating Abjection: Sites in Scotland and Environmental Factors**

Recent work by the investigative journalist Katharine Quarmby (2023) for *The Ferret* has illustrated that several authorised local authority sites across Scotland are close to hazards that impact on quality of life, health, and access to public services. Such hazards include, but are not limited to, motorways, industrial estates, sewage plants, and recycling and refuse centres. When the findings of this report by Quarmby are cross-referenced with the latest Scottish Government action plans on 'improving the lives of Gypsy/Travellers' (Scottish Government, 2019, 2023) it is hard to see how and where the improvements to sites are coming from, certainly in terms of immediate site improvements and upgrades as well as longer-term provision on new sites.

Quarmby (2023) was able to map the locations of twenty-eight authorised Gypsy/Traveller sites across Scotland and, using Google Maps, identify proximity to health-polluting and other kinds of environmental dangers and hazards (Millan and Smith, 2019). Based on Quarmby's analysis, and through cross-referencing with other online tools and resources, it is apparent that the risks to health of certain site locations – irrespective of how well they are eventually upgraded or redeveloped – will remain a major concern. In this sense, it is the locations and geographies themselves, as much as the specific site infrastructures, that is a feature of ongoing environmental injustice (such as, closeness to A-class roads, railway lines and stations, areas prone to flooding, and other factors).

The term used by Quarmby (2023) in her work is that sites are far too often located on the 'wrong side of the tracks'. This expression accurately summarises the situation of the isolated and disadvantaged geographies of where Gypsy/Traveller sites are to be found across Scotland and other parts of the UK. This spatial inequality aspect is not addressed by the Scottish Government funding schemes, to date, although it is likely that some new sites might yet be built via existing and future funding arrangements (but any new builds will be subject to rigorous planning permissions and consultations of course, and this is not at all straightforward or guaranteed when it comes to Gypsy/Traveller sites, whether council or privately owned).

The situation of the Bobbin Mill site, established in 1947 in Perth and Kinross, merits particular attention when discussing sites, the environment, health concerns, and the processes of abjection and social abjection discussed earlier. Research by McPhee (2021) has illustrated that Bobbin Mill was just one site of what is infamously referred to as the 'Tinker Experiments' in Scotland, where the long-term assimilation of Gypsy/Traveller populations was being planned for via Government, local councils, and churches acting together and offering forms of very basic and poor-quality temporary housing on traditional sites and stopping places. As McPhee shows, the legacy of the 'Tinker Experiment' continues to this day. The accommodation at Bobbin Mill, originally a Nissan hut designed for use by prisoners of war between 1939-1945, remains sparse and hazardous, with asbestos in room partitions only being removed in the 1980s and with not even basic services being provided for at that time. Indeed, electricity, running water supply, and sewage facilities only emerged into the early 2000s. By 2010 the original hut was demolished and recycled/repurposed chalets were placed on the site, alongside private caravans (Clark, 2020). Maintenance across the period has been limited and although a rural location, its spatial position has been impacted by new developments such as car parks, a hospital, and a train station. The health issues faced by residents is of concern due to the fume and noise pollution, which has led to complaints from site residents of asthma, long-term coughs, and other associated respiratory diseases.

In other parts of Scotland similar issues have been recorded by residents on a variety of different Gypsy/Traveller sites, so Bobbin Mill is by no means unique in terms of the negative environmental issues and health issues being faced by community members who live on such sites. As Quarmby (2023: np) notes in her analysis of the data:

Of the sites mapped in Scotland: thirteen out of twenty-eight (46 per cent) were fifty meters or less from the hazards and locations with pollution and environmental degradation, with 15 out of 28 at 100 m or less (54 per cent), and twenty one out of twenty-eight (75 per cent) at 300 m or



less. These findings compare to similar research done in England, where there were far more sites (242) but slightly fewer in unpleasant locations – 36 per cent at 50 meters or less, 51 per cent at 100m or less and 72 per cent at 300 m or less. In Wales, site location of the twenty-one identified and mapped was significantly worse – (62 per cent at 50 meters, 86 per cent at 100 m, 100 per cent at 300 m or less).

Lying within and behind these stark statistics are several casualties who stay at such ‘unpleasant locations’, caused by various environmental hazards, whether close by busy A-roads, industrial estates, sewage treatment plants. Such toxic and polluting ‘non-places’, in the spirit of the late Marc Augé (Merriman, 2009), are also isolated which can have consequences for access to other public services, such as healthcare, education, and employment/training opportunities. Such features appear to hold good in both rural and more urban locations, such as in Angus, Scotland (the site at Balmuir Wood) or Larkhall in South Lanarkshire (the site at Shawlands Crescent). Common features of such sites are that the land has previously been rejected for housing, due to proximity to roads, railway lines, electricity pylons and sub-stations, landfill sites, or waste ground (such as former coal board land or medical/household waste sites). The areas being prone to flooding also seems to be a common feature, and it was telling that in a recent report on ‘poisoned’ mine water flooding in Dalkeith there was concern for the local wildlife but scant mention of residents at a Gypsy/Traveller site close by the river (Smith, 2020).

A consequence of Gypsy/Traveller sites being located in such environmentally challenging spaces, with a legacy of pollution and toxic effects on the land is, unfortunately, increased incidences of vermin. Indeed, as Quarmby (2023) confirms, this is one of the most common complaints received from residents on sites in Scotland, as recorded by councils complying with Scottish Environmental Information Regulations (EIRs). Other common issues included sewage, mould, pollution (air, noise, and land), blocked drains, and other infestations, such as termites and other insects. The central issue here is that even the best and most useful site upgrades, funded via the Scottish Government twenty million pound Gypsy/Traveller Accommodation Fund, will not fundamentally change the environmental nature of the location and geography of the space that the upgrades take place on. There will be ongoing health and safety concerns for many site residents, whether in Cupar, Fife, or in Aberdeen City. There are also some concerns from long-term and older residents about the new type of chalets that will replace the older style structures, the newer designs being more akin to ‘industrial shipping containers’ rather than regarded as day-to-day living chalets for families.

In response to some of the issues raised by site residents and other key stakeholders, the Scottish Government has an advisory group that meets regularly to evaluate applications to the Gypsy/Traveller Accommodation Fund from councils, and this group has active community member representation via third sector agencies such as MECOPP (Minority Ethnic Carers of People Project) based in Edinburgh. The investment in ‘model sites’ in selected locations across Scotland is an opportunity to showcase the potential of innovative design work as much as community engagement and participation in upgrading locations to meet the varying needs of site residents, whether old or young, those with families, and those with disabilities. Further, if councils pay heed to the Scottish Government interim site design guide (Scottish Government, 2021b), then all site upgrades and redesign work should follow and meet with appropriate social housing standards, with respect to cultural preferences of site residents and also encourage

participation in the planning and design of the accommodation. The core issue will be, given the lengthy delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the fault lines and rising costs that have emerged in the construction industry due to Brexit, whether more Local Authorities take-up the opportunity to access the Accommodation Fund whilst the funding is provided or not. Indeed, this will be a major test in the next few years: how high up the local authority agenda is providing better quality Gypsy/Traveller sites and pitches in Scotland?

## Conclusion

It has been argued in this paper that meeting the accommodation needs of Gypsy/Traveller community members who are residents on sites across Scotland should be a priority for any government that claims to be promoting social justice and tackling inequalities. Since the local elections in May 2022, it is true, the fortunes of the ruling party, the SNP, have not been straight forward (Mitchell, 2023). However, following the leadership contest in March 2023, where Humza Yousaf replaced Nicola Sturgeon as First Minister, the political relationship with the Scottish Greens, in a governing coalition with the SNP, appears to be relatively intact, and it is hoped that they will continue to remind their senior partner about the importance of the accommodation needs of Gypsy/Traveller constituents who stay on sites.

It has also been argued that the concept of abjection, especially social abjection as developed by Imogen Tyler (2013), who was critiquing the original thesis presented by Julia Kristeva (1982), can be helpful in showing exactly how, both at an individual level and a more structural and physical level, Gypsy/Traveller communities and their geographical sites are regarded as stigmatised individuals who inhabit 'non-places' that are isolated and polluted/toxic (in the Mary Douglas (1966) sense). Social abjection helps, at least partially, to explain the historical legacies of site locations in Scotland and how planning permission was granted for site locations that were rejected for most other accommodation purposes. The fear of the abject 'other' is seen when new sites are proposed in more desirable parts of the country and *flatties* (settled non-Gypsy/Traveller Scottish people) write to complain about the impact on neighbouring property prices and assumed anti-social behaviours and imagined fears of potential crime (Thompson and Woodger, 2020; Holdsworth, 2020, James, 2020).

The contemporary and relevant background and context of Gypsy/Traveller communities, their numbers, and recent site developments in Scotland have been briefly outlined, in particular the Scottish Government Gypsy/Traveller action plan for 2019-2021, and the expanded plan covering 2023. It has been argued that the twenty million pound Scottish Government fund to upgrade and improve existing sites, or create new sites, across the country (Scottish Government, 2019b) has been much welcomed, and is politically and symbolically crucial in terms of the social inclusion dynamics, but its application and take-up via Local Authorities has been severely delayed and progress to date quite limited due to a range of external factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit. The examples of Gypsy/Traveller sites at Bobbin Mill (McPhee, 2021) and at Double Dykes, both in Perth and Kinross, have illustrated some of the fundamental challenges in terms of 'upgrades' to existing sites not improving the actual landscapes and geographical spaces being occupied by Gypsy/Traveller families.

The environmental and health consequences of poor site location for residents was discussed, drawing on the excellent data-led journalism of investigative journalist Katharine Quarmby (2023). This recent body of work has starkly illustrated the proximity of the majority of Gypsy/Traveller sites in Scotland to environmental hazards – hazards that would not routinely be acceptable for other forms of ‘bricks and mortar’ social housing (such as major roads, railway lines, electricity pylons and sub-stations, landfill sites, and toxic/polluted waste ground). As she argues, such unpleasant locations for sites are too often found on ‘the wrong side of the tracks’, and the impact this has on Gypsy/Traveller health status and quality of life is profound and unacceptable in a socially just society.

In closing, the key argument of this article is that whilst the recent twenty million-pound Scottish Government Gypsy/Traveller Accommodation Fund is important and necessary, in terms of offering councils funding to undertake essential upgrades to existing site provision, this does not offer the potential for more fundamental or radical changes to site locations and new spaces that are environmentally safe for families to stay on. This bolder future – of new, safer, ‘green’ spaces for locating Gypsy/Traveller sites – will require something much more; a political will that seeks to challenge and change both discriminatory legislative planning issues, as well as deeper structural issues rooted in challenging the social abjection faced by Gypsy/Traveller community members and their long-held cultural preferences to stay on sites. Opposition to Gypsy/Traveller site developments in Scotland, for both public and private sites, continues to prevent families settling in more ‘pleasant’ locales, and it is difficult to see how this square will be circled without much more radical political, social, and economic interventions to ensure sites are located in safe places across the country.

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