



Scottish
Human Rights
Commission



“No man’s land”

**A human rights assessment
of the ‘Tinker Experiment’
and redress for its victims**

January 2026

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Executive summary

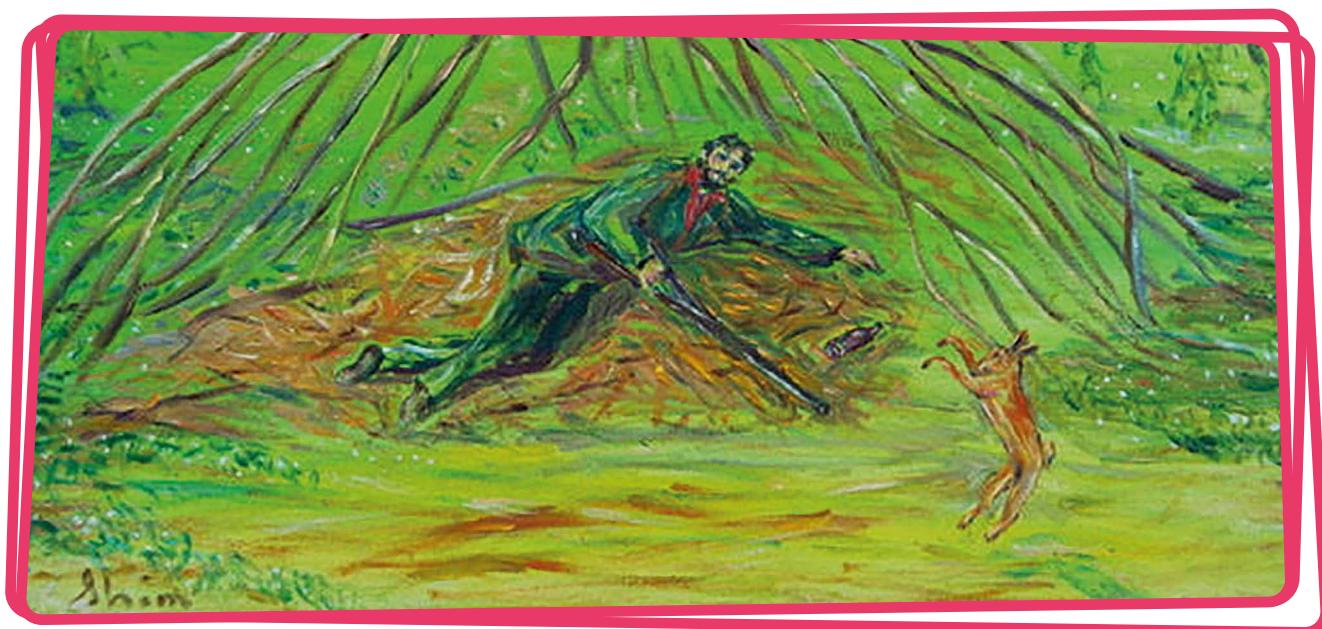
Background and context

The issue of the Tinker Experiment was first raised in the Scottish Parliament in 2010. At this time, the Public Petitions Committee stated that more evidence was required in order to justify an apology.¹ Over the years that followed, victims of the experiment continued to advocate for the issue to be addressed. In 2016, they formed RAJPOT (Refuge for Allies of Justice and Persons from Oppressed Tribes), a Gypsy Traveller led inter-cultural peace centre. RAJPOT went on to share their experiences at events and met with senior Scottish Government officials, eventually leading the Scottish Government to commission research into the experiment in 2023. That research was undertaken by the Third Generation Project at the University of St Andrews.

The Scottish Government research identified a range of State and private actors involved in the Tinker Experiment including national governments, Scottish Office-led committees, Scottish local authorities, the Church of Scotland, the police, and charities including the Royal Scottish Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Children (RSSPCC), the Aberlour Trust, Quarriers and Barnardo's. The research refers to what occurred as a 'Cultural Genocide'.

Following the completion of that research, on the 25th of June 2025, during Gypsy Roma Traveller History Month, First Minister John Swinney offered the victims of the Tinker Experiment an apology. However, the apology was lacking the tangible plans for redress and reparations that the victims had spent over 15 years advocating for.

The issue of the Tinker Experiment was brought to the attention of the SHRC in 2023. We met with victims of the experiment, visited sites at Bobbin Mill and Tarvit Mill and heard victims' experiences of the impact of the Tinker Experiment. In 2023, SHRC decided to undertake a spotlight project, commencing work the following year. This project involved working with victims to investigate the cultural recognition of Scotland's Gypsy Travellers as a human rights issue.



Cage fight: Shamus McPhee

Approach and purpose of this report

This report presents the SHRC’s analysis of the human rights issues raised by the Tinker Experiment. Our analysis draws on the independent research we commissioned, alongside an examination of the relevant international human rights laws and frameworks. This includes both legally binding human rights treaties as well as non-legally binding guidance, reports, and general comments from international human rights bodies.

This report presents testimonial evidence from victims in line with the SHRC’s Participation Strategy for 2024-28.² All reasonable efforts have been made to verify statements as fact. However, much of the record on the Tinker Experiment lies in recollections, the experiences and the impacts felt by the victims themselves. Many of the recollections are supported by documents from the Victims’ Archive. Therefore, we have treated this evidence as authoritative for the purposes of identifying human rights issues.

This report makes recommendations for addressing the continuing human rights issues stemming from the Tinker Experiment. The SHRC is clear that while the Tinker Experiment may have involved interventions which were lawful at the time they occurred, their lawfulness was the product of anti-Gypsy Traveller prejudice across Scotland and the UK. This led to discrimination and continuing human rights issues. Given this, our human rights analysis considers the ongoing harms of the Tinker Experiment by the human rights standards of today.

The final recommendations in this report are informed by an independent expert analysis conducted by Professor Mairead Enright, an expert on redress. Victims of the experiment have had the opportunity to comment on and inform recommendations in line with the SHRC’s Participation Strategy and the PANEL principles.³ These recommendations reflect the actions required of the State by human rights standards and best practice, and which should now be further designed, delivered and implemented in partnership with victims of the experiment and Scotland’s Gypsy Travellers.

The evidence and analysis in this report have led to 20 key findings. These findings cover both historic and continuing human rights issues. They focus on the forced assimilation of Scotland’s Gypsy Travellers as well as issues relating to the rights to adequate housing, private and family life, health, education, employment and cultural life.

Key findings

Forced assimilation

- 1** The State systemically forced the assimilation of Scotland's Gypsy Travellers by conflating nomadism with vagrancy, discriminating against Gypsy Travellers and by enacting laws in the 1800s and 1900s to suppress nomadic practice and to remove Gypsy Traveller children from their families.
- 2** The acts of forced assimilation carried out by the State are incompatible with Article 5(2) of the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (FCNM).



Right to adequate housing

- 3** The Scottish Government and local authorities have failed, and continue to fail, to uphold an adequate standard of living protected by Article 11 of ICESCR in relation to adequate housing for Scotland's Gypsy Travellers.
- 4** Failure to uphold Article 11 of ICESCR is clearly evidenced in the development of experiment sites, like Bobbin Mill, which were used to forcibly assimilate Scotland's Gypsy Travellers through the provision of intentionally substandard accommodation paid for by the State.
- 5** Examples of substandard accommodation funded by the State include the use of asbestos wood walls in the Nissen hut at Bobbin Mill. Additionally, there is no electricity at Bobbin Mill until the 2010s. This lagged behind improvements made to general housing provision.
- 6** Documentary evidence suggests that Perth County Council knew of the Church of Scotland's attempt to establish a camp at Gothens.
- 7** Local councils sought to roll out the approach taken at Bobbin Mill in a number of areas across Scotland.
- 8** Failure to uphold Article 11 of ICESCR continues today through the provision of substandard accommodation at sites including: Bobbin Mill, Double Dykes and Tarvit Mill as highlighted by the Scottish Housing Regulator.
- 9** The substandard accommodation conditions currently experienced by Scotland's Gypsy Travellers raises further issues in relation to discrimination. The evidence suggests a failure to address issues arising under Article 8 combined with Article 14 of the ECHR, Article 2 of ICESCR and Article 5(e) of CERD. All articles require states to both prohibit and take active steps to eliminate discrimination in rights such as adequate housing.





Right to private and family life

10

By removing children from a family of Gypsy Travellers at Bobbin Mill for no other reason than to ease overcrowding, when alternative measures were available, the State failed to comply with Article 8 of the ECHR regarding respect for private and family life.

11

Threats to remove children were used by the State to compel families to assimilate, would, by today's standards amount to an interference with Article 8 of the ECHR. This has caused mental distress and prevented Scotland's Gypsy Travellers from conducting their family life and has caused significant and lasting trauma.

12

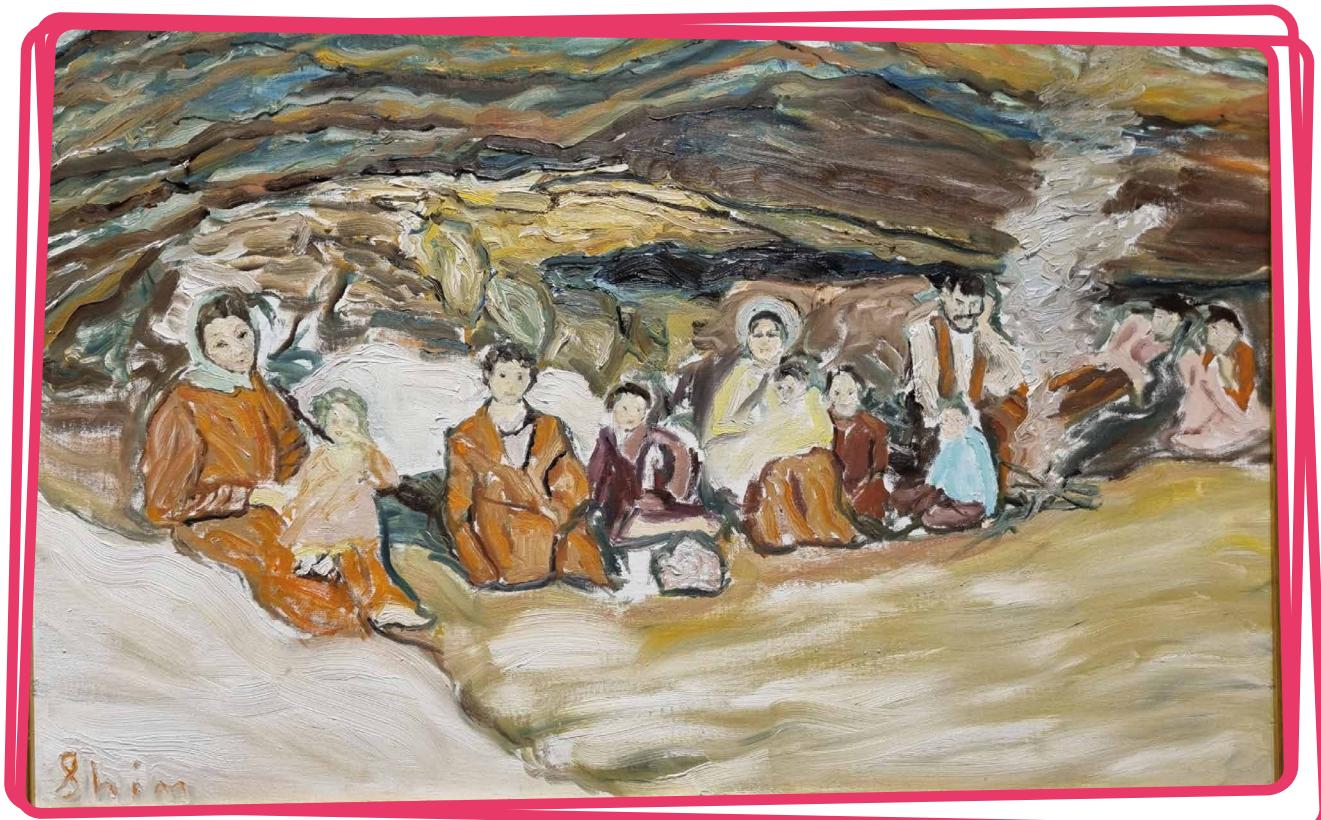
Removing children and placing them into care homes, including Kippen House, raises human rights issues in relation to Article 9 of the UNCRC.



Rights to health, education and employment.

13

Failure to comply with Article 11 of ICESCR by forcing Scotland's Gypsy Travellers to assimilate in substandard accommodation the State has put rights to health, education and employment of the victims of the Tinker Experiment at risk.



Cave in Wick: Shamus McPhee



Rights to cultural life

- 14** By enacting legislation and policy which forced Scotland's Gypsy Travellers to accept council housing provided by local authorities in areas where Gypsy Travellers faced hostility, the State has failed to comply with the right to cultural life protected by Article 15 of ICESCR and to provide culturally appropriate accommodation as protected by Article 11 of ICESCR.
- 15** By failing to address legal barriers to reinstate the use of stopping places, for example via the Land Reform (Scotland) Act in 2003 and again in 2016, the State has failed to meet its duty under ICESCR to progressively increase access to cultural practices.
- 16** The State has failed to protect and contributed to the active destruction of Scotland's Gypsy Traveller culture.



Redress and reparations

- 17** Victims of the Tinker Experiment have requested redress including apologies and reparations including compensation, cultural investment and improvements in accommodation.
- 18** The Scottish Government apology in June 2025 does not meet human rights standards adopted by the UN General Assembly in relation to remedy and reparation for victims of human rights violations.
- 19** Evidence suggests significant differences in the approach from duty bearers to providing redress in the form of apologies, to different groups of victims in Scotland.
- 20** A transformative reparations approach which demonstrates alignment with international human rights standards should be used to address the harms of the Tinker Experiment.

Recommendations

The SHRC is clear that State action to address the past and ongoing harms of the Tinker Experiment must include meaningful participation and leadership of victims of the experiment and Scotland’s Gypsy Travellers across all elements of reparations. This should be done in conjunction with reviewing legal standards of the past, recognising cultural losses and rejecting state-centric and assimilative practices. The following recommendations should be taken forward at pace.

Overarching recommendation: State adoption of a transformative reparations approach

We recommend that duty bearers adopt a transformative reparations approach in response to the Tinker Experiment.

A transformative reparations approach consists of four key elements including:

1. Participation and leadership of victims in the design and development of their own reparations.
2. Critiquing and reviewing legal standards of the past. Duty bearers should critique and review legislation which continues perpetuate harm done to victims.
3. Recognition of the cultural harms and losses including reparations for: experiences of substandard accommodation, actual and threatened child removal, forced displacement as well as measures to establish adequate culturally appropriate housing for the victims and their descendants.
4. Rejection of State-centric and assimilationist approaches in the delivery of reparations by ensuring that the process of providing reparations does not inflict further harm and trauma on affected people by reinforcing assimilationist norms or focusing on the needs of the State. This can be achieved primarily through a reparations scheme that is both independently operated and monitored by an independent oversight mechanism.

By adopting a transformative reparations approach, the State should be able to deliver against the following recommendations for victims of the Tinker Experiment:



Compensation

- Financial compensation to victims and families



Rehabilitation

- Culturally appropriate review of, and steps to ensure adequacy of, accommodation provision including Gypsy Traveller sites
- Investment in community empowerment, self-advocacy and cultural development



Satisfaction

- Further Scottish Government apologies
- Truth recovery on harms to children



Guarantees of non-repetition

- A review of current legislation and policy
- Ensuring equality in access to remedy



Turdies and his Naismort: Shamus McPhee

Timeline of the key events relating to the Tinker Experiment

YEAR	EVENT
1824	The vagrancy act made it a criminal offence in England and Wales to be homeless.
1854	The Reformatory And Industrial Schools (Scotland) Act was enacted, allowing for children under fourteen to be sent to an industrial school if found begging, not having a home, proper guardianship, or visible means of subsistence.
1865	The Trespass (Scotland) Act was enacted, making it an offence to lodge or camp on premises or private land without the consent of the landowner or legal occupier of that land.
1871	An extension of the vagrancy act was made to Scotland through Section 15 Of The Prevention Of Crimes Act, which criminalised those living in the open air or under a tent.
1871	The Pedlars Act regulates individuals traveling to sell goods or services, including those defined as 'tinkers' under the act.
1887	The Roads And Bridges (Scotland) Act was enacted, which prohibited gypsy travellers from pitching tents or encamping on or by the side of any turnpike road.
1894	The establishment of the Departmental Committee On Habitual Offenders, Vagrants, Beggars, Inebriates And Juvenile Delinquents by the secretary of state for Scotland leading to an inquiry.
1895	The Departmental Committee On Habitual Offenders, Vagrants, Beggars, Inebriates And Juvenile Delinquents publishes its report.
1897	The Public Health (Scotland) Act was enacted, which gave individual local authorities powers to create by-laws for the regulation of tents, sheds, and other similar structures.
1908	The Children Act was enacted, which fined Gypsy Traveller parents for nomadism and could result in children being removed from families and sent to industrial schools.
1917	A Departmental Committee on 'Tinkers In Scotland' was appointed by the Scottish Office to examine existing living conditions.
1918	Departmental Committee On Tinkers In Scotland publishes its report which suggests that the Children Act should be used to settle Gypsy Traveller children.



YEAR	EVENT
1936	A report from the Departmental Committee On Vagrancy In Scotland made recommendations about 'absorbing tinkers into ordinary society'. ⁴
1945	Initial communications between Perth County Council and a solicitor in Auchterarder to purchase an ex-air training corps hut for use at Bobbin Mill.
1945	Letter from county architect and master of works to the county clerk of Perth and Kinross County states that the conversion of the hut at Bobbin Mill should include an asbestos wood wall.
1946	Secretary of State for Scotland approved costs for the purchase and modification of huts.
1946	Perth County Council purchased a Nissen hut, formerly used by the air training corps (atc) at Aberfeldy, for £220.
1946	Conversion of the Nissen hut into four units with two rooms each is undertaken. Perth County Council spent an additional £823 on the dismantling, re-erection and adaptation of the hut and purchased and installed a septic tank.
1947 ⁵	Bobbin Mill becomes the first official use of temporary ex-military accommodation used to accommodate Gypsy Travellers.
1954	Church of Scotland chaplain to tinkers, William Webb, wrote to Perth County Council asking them to consider the purchase of an old church and associated land for a permanent camp site for Gypsy Travellers.
1954	Perth County Council turned down the above suggestion made by William Webb based on advice from local police and a medical officer.
1955	A letter from the Perth County Council clerk to the town clerk outlines the active discouragement of camping near Bobbin Mill.
1955	The county clerk wrote to the county factor, Perth County Council, to raise concerns about overcrowding in two of the accommodations at Bobbin Mill and to take action to address this issue.
1956	The Children's Officer sends a memo to the county factor, requesting that an additional room be added to one of the properties at Bobbin Mill. The Children's Officer states that if this does not occur, the two twins will need to be removed after their birth due to the inadequate accommodation conditions.

YEAR	EVENT
1956	Wick Town Council minutes show a decision was taken to offer a house to a Gypsy Traveller.
1956	Following the decision of Wick Town Council a petition signed by over thirty tenants of nearby council houses protesting The Gypsy Traveller moving to the area.
1956	Letter from County Clerk, Ross And Cromarty to Department Of Health for Scotland, shows that Ross and Cromarty instituted a policy of housing only small groups of gypsy travellers in one place.
1956	A newspaper article in Ross-shire journal states there are planned hut sites in three areas: 1) Carnaclashair, Muir Of Ord. 2) Katewell, Evanton. 3) Lewis.
1957	Evidence of William Webb’s efforts to establish a campsite, as referenced in a letter from the Perth Council County clerk regarding a failed ‘experiment’ at Gothens.
1957	Communications between Perth County Council and the county clerk in Dingwall (county clerk of Ross and Cromarty) regarding the development of the experiment site.
1957	The Landward Committee Of Public Health Of Inverness County Council noted that wooden huts were being provided to accommodate two families in Muir Of Ord, Ross-shire.
1957	Communications between Perth County Council and the county clerk of the Council Of Inverness regarding the development of the experiment site.
1958	The Gypsy Traveller resident in Wick was evicted by Public Health And Welfare Committee.
1958	Lewis Town Council minutes outline that the district town council proposed the erection of huts as an experiment.
1960	The caravan sites and control of development act was enacted required all landowners to acquire a licence from the local authority for providing caravan sites.
1964	Communications between Perth County Council and the county clerk of the Council Of Argyll regarding establishing an experiment site.

YEAR	EVENT
1965	Memo from Perth County Council county architect to Perth County Council county clerk and meeting between county sanitary inspector and tinkers padre outlining unsatisfactory sanitary conditions at almond water camps and proposals made to build houses for Gypsy Travellers there.
1968	The caravan sites act placed an obligation on local authorities in England and Wales to provide proper sites for Gypsy Travellers residing in their areas. This did not extend to Scotland.
1969	A study into 'the nature and problems of Scotland's travelling people' was commissioned by the Scotland Office. Its reports were published in 1971.
1970	Moving of Gypsy Travellers from Almond Grove to Hunter's Crescent housing scheme.
1971	An Advisory Committee On Scotland's Travelling People was established.
1978	Enactment of the Refuse Disposal (Amenity) Act, which made it an offence to abandon a vehicle, including a trailer, on any land or any part of a road, including a verge.
1980	Two permanent local authority sites had been completed in Scotland.
1994	Enactment of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act, which gave the police additional powers to attend an encampment to decide if an offence had been committed.
1998	The Advisory Committee On Scotland's Travelling People's Work ended.
1998	Thirty local authority sites had been completed in Scotland.
2001	The Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee undertake an inquiry into Gypsy Travellers and public sector policies.
2001	The Housing (Scotland) Act was enacted requiring local authorities to prepare a local housing strategy, which sets out their strategic vision for housing and related services, including Gypsy Traveller accommodation.
2003	The Land Reform (Scotland) Act was enacted and made provision for some forms of wild camping for leisure purposes and imposed limitations on the duration of campsites, motorised vehicles and the number of people permitted.

YEAR	EVENT
2013	The Scottish Parliament Equal Opportunities Committee conducted an inquiry into the quality and quantity of culturally appropriate accommodation for Scotland's Gypsy Travellers.
2019	The Planning (Scotland) Act created a duty to engage with Gypsy Travellers living in Scotland in local planning processes.
2019	The Scottish Government and COSLA launch the 'improving lives of Gypsy/Travellers action plan' for 2019 to 2021. This was supported by £3 million of investment.
2021	A £20 million investment to improve existing sites and create new sites was committed to by the Scottish Government as part of Housing 2040.
2024	The Scottish Government and COSLA extended the 'Improving Lives Of Gypsy / Travellers Action Plan' via a second plan informed by a community listening exercise, which was launched to run until 2026.
2024 -2025	The Scottish Housing Regulator finds serious failings of local authorities to meet obligations under the Scottish Social Housing Charter and Scottish Government's minimum site standards in relation to Bobbin Mill and Double Dykes in Perth and Kinross and Tarvit Mill in Fife.
2025	First Minister of Scotland apologises for historic events of the 'Tinker Experiment'. An apology from the Church of Scotland follows later the same day.
2026	Perth and Kinross Council apologise to victims for its role in the 'Tinker Experiment'

Note: This timeline does not seek to cover every event in relation to the Tinker Experiment but rather to provide a comprehensive summary of Ramsay and McPhee's research in combination with key events identified from SHRC's literature review, which have been considered as part of the SHRC's human rights framework analysis.

Endnotes

- 1 The Scottish Parliament (2010). **The Public Petitions Committee**.
- 2 Scottish Human Rights Commission, **Participation Strategy 2024-28**
- 3 See: **Victims’ Statement**
- 4 Report of the Departmental Committee on Vagrancy in Scotland (Department of Health for Scotland). Presented by the Secretary of State for Scotland to parliament by Command of His Majesty. (1936)
- 5 Ramsay and McPhee’s research (2025), points to two newspaper articles which indicate families first moved into Bobbin Mill in 1948. However, the Third Generation Project’s research report states Bobbin Mill came into operation in 1947. Therefore, for the purposes of this report, we have used the date 1947.



Scottish Human Rights Commission
Bridgeside House
99 McDonald Road
Edinburgh
EH7 4NS

scottishhumanrights.com