

2009

The Scottish Women's Convention

Report on Elgin Roadshow

June 2009

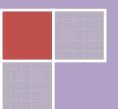


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Introduction

The purpose of the Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is to communicate and consult with women in Scotland to influence public policy. Through the Convention's policy work, round table and celebratory events the SWC strives to have contact with women and relevant organisations. The SWC aims to provide an effective way of consulting with a diverse range of women in Scotland.

The Scottish Women's Convention has a network of over 300,000 women from relevant organisations throughout Scotland.

Background to Elgin Event

Since 2007 the SWC have undertaken a series of "Roadshows" across Scotland to consult and engage with women in order to draw together their views and comments on issues of concern in contemporary Scottish life. These are presented to relevant policy makers, interested parties and also made available to our wider network. The response from the women we have met has been enthusiastic and SWC recommendations are delivered to appropriate decision making bodies on behalf of the women who have taken part.

The SWC Roadshows have proven to be a popular and effective way to reach a large and diverse population of women who might otherwise have no opportunity to present their opinions or concerns.

The SWC visit to Elgin took place at the Laichmory Hotel, Maisondieu Road on Thursday 25th June 2009

Thirty women registered for the event. The format for discussion was centred on aspects of rural living for women in the Scottish Borders.

The SWC would like to thank the women who attended the event for their contributions and for the warm welcome we received.

Moray Information¹

With a population of some 87,000 Moray is one of the smaller Councils in Scotland, though it covers a wide geographical area and is the 8th largest Council in terms of area. Compared to the rest of Scotland, Moray has a much smaller proportion of its population living in an urban situation.

Most people (almost 60%) live in the 5 main towns of Elgin, Buckie, Forres, Keith and Lossiemouth. The overall population density is low at 39 persons per square kilometre (compared to 66 in Scotland). Elgin is the administrative and commercial capital of Moray Elgin is approximately 125 miles from Perth, 170 miles from Edinburgh and 190 miles from Glasgow.

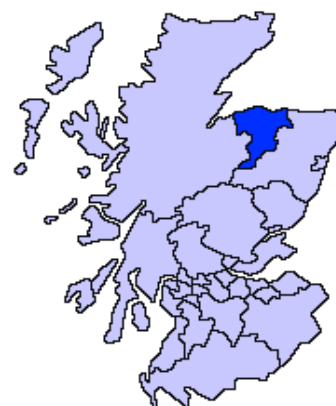
The traditional industries of farming, fishing and forestry underpin the economy. Moray is also the heartland of the Scotch Whisky industry and food producers. The food processing industry is concentrated in a small number of local family-owned firms, whilst the ownership of local distilleries is dominated by major multi-national firms. The presence of the Royal Air Force with its twin bases at Lossiemouth and nearby Kinloss is significant and accounts for more than 20 percent of employment in the area. The average gross weekly wage in Moray is the lowest in Scotland, at £377.30, which is one of the reasons that the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) states that 9.3% of Moray is income deprived. There is a high reliance on low paid food manufacturing sector jobs.

The working age population accounts for approximately 61% of the total population and around 82% of the working-age population are economically active. Compared to Scottish norms more people work part-time and more are self employed. The population of Moray has grown in the past 25 years but most of this growth has been fuelled by the increase in armed forces personnel and supporting staff; more recently also by migrant workers.

The area has relatively few students due to young people moving away to access higher education. Moray also has more school leavers moving directly into employment than nationally.

Fuel poverty in Moray is 21% in comparison to Scotland at 13% with access to services such as transport, education, shopping and petrol stations in comparison to Scotland is considerably poor, particularly in the rural areas of Moray and presents social and economic disadvantage.

The Moray Council is responsible for providing all the major local authority services in the Moray area, including Education, Social Work, Roads, Economic Development & Planning and Leisure Services. The Council employs around 4,500 people across a whole range of professions and skills.



¹ <http://www.yourmoray.org.uk/News/Doc0309/SOARReport20092010.pdf>
<http://www.yourmoray.org.uk/News/Doc0309/SOAAAppendix1.pdf>

REPORT

SWC Roadshows throughout Scotland have provided the opportunity for women to record their issues and concerns on aspects of their lives that can exacerbate isolation, exclusion and inequality. Throughout these Roadshows it has become increasingly apparent that too many women throughout Scotland are experiencing widespread, shared barriers which prevent them fulfilling their economic, educational and personal potential. Furthermore, feedback confirms that a number of public and private service providers are failing to address the gender impact of their strategies and this is adversely affecting the quality of support and overall wellbeing of Scottish women.

Issues of concern for women in Moray

Characteristics of Poverty:

The women who attended the Elgin Roadshow believed that wider concepts of poverty in Scotland are not always understood by politicians and decision makers, particularly significant gender based issues. As a consequence, public policy initiatives frequently fail to improve the substance of women's lives. For women who are exposed to long term experiences of deprivation, this lack of empathy and focus on gender needs contributes to increased feelings of exclusion and isolation.

This view is supported by the feedback that the SWC has received throughout its Roadshow programme, in particular from rural women.

There is real frustration in many rural communities that service or support needs are assessed and evaluated by various providers in very different ways. Often decisions are made by centralised bodies who have little concept of the potential outcome effects.

“There needs to be better understanding of what poverty is and how it affects women. It's too easy to say it is financial. It is inequality – in a women's case one breeds the other.”

The women said that short term uncoordinated action initiatives frequently have little lasting impact or positive results for women or their shared local circumstances.

“They don't seem to be listening to us about what is needed there is too much assumption. It is still about covering the symptoms instead of tackling the root causes.”

There was much focused debate about the symptoms of poverty in the Moray region from acute situations of destitution to less immediately obvious conditions of social exclusion. What the women identified during this debate was a number of key issues which they felt contributed to the root causes of inequality and consequential disadvantage for women in the area.

Employment:

Participants advised the SWC that in work poverty was an issue for women in Moray. There was agreement that unemployment levels in the region did not impact on them as much as the type of employment available. They went on to explain that Moray has the highest number of small businesses in Scotland per head of population and jobs with these small companies are often part time and particularly in today's economic climate unreliable in the long term.

The part time nature of employment together with financial outlays incurred by working, such as childcare or transport, can mean that single income households face particularly difficult choices in terms of income and outlay.

"Your life revolves around how much money you have and what you can do with it."

Where full time work is available it tends to be in processing work related to the food or drinks industries and these jobs are often low waged and without career development prospects. Higher costs of living in rural areas set against patterns of low wage work availability were seen to perpetuate generational conditions of in work poverty in the region. In other words, families were employed, yet through working still unable to lift themselves out of lower income deciles.

There was concern expressed by the women that the economic wellbeing of the area depended on the presence of the RAF bases of Lossiemouth and Kinloss. They said if the bases were removed from the region the local economy and consequently employment would be dealt a severe blow.

"The area is so dependent on the RAF when they lay off civilians or don't renew local contracts there are ramifications for the whole community."

Although there was Government commitment the bases would be there for another 8 years the long term uncertainty was having its affect on the community even now.

"A new high school was to be built but it was stopped as the future of the bases is uncertain."

"Over three hundred engineers recently lost jobs on the bases; this has a big effect on shops, businesses and families."

Participants also said the unfavourable combination of low paid work, uncertainty of future stability in the area and the predominance of part time work for women forced a lot of young women out of the area in order to improve their income and opportunity. The women strongly felt that more should be done to attract business to the area which would allow women to develop sustainable careers in the Moray area. They would also welcome increased apprenticeship and graduate positions to be supported by local business and industry to ensure women in the region are provided with opportunities to be economically self sufficient, fully skilled and able to progress personal development.

"Young women in Moray should not be faced with leaving to get careers or staying and giving up any aspirations or ambitions. It is such a waste."

Older Women:

Isolation was raised as an issue for women in Moray especially older women. Whilst this was a particular issue for those in the more rural communities it was not exclusive to them as it was very much an issue for women from more urban areas such as Elgin.

It was said an increasing number of support services and social organisations in the area are curtailing their activities by reducing local access or closing due to funding problems. Women who are dependent on them can experience greater material and emotional isolation as a result of the void left by the withdrawal of the services or social interaction offered by these organisations.

“Moray against Poverty, for example, that’s winding down due to lack of funding. It is happening a lot - everything ends up being short term.”

“A lot of clubs and organisations have had to disband or close such as Woman’s Guilds, SWRI.”

Older women confirmed they welcome services such as “Meals on Wheels” and where they are available they undoubtedly provide a valuable contact service for older community residents. Nevertheless participants pointed out that there is no social aspect to this type of service and while extremely welcome it does not replace the shared relationship with support networks.

It was felt that when prioritising services there should be more understanding of the importance of social networks for older people and the need to provide access to these by improving the transport links in the area.

Older participants also expressed a great deal of concern about the value of pensions and their need to work longer to maintain a quality of life.

“There is going to be a real problem in the near future – women will barely be able to exist on their pension provisions.”

This lack of economic independence and increasing financial worry is extremely isolating in rural communities in Scotland where inherent pride and local standing is an important part of identity. Some women admit they are scared to own up to not eating or that they are not coping.

A number of women highlighted the hidden nature of the problem in rural areas as a number of the older population are asset rich and income poor. They can be afraid to draw attention to their issues as they do not want to be relocated or further isolated from what is familiar to them. An alternative, particularly in regard to affordable housing, is often scarce.

The erosion of wider community frameworks clearly has a significant bearing on the wellbeing of older women in rural communities. They keenly feel the demise of local post offices, mobile libraries and banks. Socialising can become difficult as services are centralised and mobility curtailed.

“Men go to the local pub to socialise. For women who are on their own it is very different and feelings of vulnerability and disconnection can mean they just don’t get out.”

Access to Services:

“In rural areas especially poverty is so often about a lack of choice.”

This opinion was strongly supported by the women. They said that the lack or inconsistency of service provision or commodity choice available to them can noticeably reduce living standards and increase living costs in rural areas.

The women felt that too many services are centralised in Elgin and their experiences suggested that accessing a number of services depended very much on the extent of an individual's access to transport or the affordability of fares. They thought that too often processes decided by policy makers fail to consider the people they are designed to assist.

“We are expected to fit around services rather than services accommodating us – it is not always realistic in terms of people's lives.”

Participants were particularly critical of the level of bureaucracy which accompanies different benefit provisions and the need for repeated processes to relate the same details.

“Restricted funding means that parts of Moray are left with no services. Not everyone lives in Elgin and you may have to make several journeys before your issues are sorted.”

The development of “hub” services which would allow several providers to offer satellite support from a single site was considered to be a cost effective way to improve uptake and access in more rural communities.

It was suggested that Moray is perceived as a prosperous area due to its position between the economic growth areas of Aberdeenshire and Inverness. The women are of the opinion these perceptions are exacerbated by the “imported wealth” of those who work in these areas but reside in Moray. The reality is that choice is limited and premium costs are being paid to shop locally in an area where wage income is lower than the national average.

“If you can get to a supermarket then food is cheaper but this is not always possible. Those on limited incomes can not afford to travel to Inverness or Aberdeen for the cost savings that retail competition brings”

The women complained of the difficulty of locating local doctors and dentists in the more rural parts of Moray. The loss local services such as these and also banks, post offices and libraries have a huge effect on communities and the women feel it is a lottery as to whether one community thrives and another does not due to funding priorities.

“There is a danger that adding a service may reduce another to the detriment of people in rural areas.”

Transport:

In common with many women in Scotland the participants felt transport provision did not adequately meet needs within their community. They were also of the opinion that transport providers frequently fail to acknowledge, in the delivery of local transport, women are usually the major users of their services.

Furthermore they suggested in rural areas especially, the cost of transport should be reasonable. There was strong support for subsidised local transport to be extended to families on income support and for work travel for minimum wage earners. Additionally, service frequency is an important issue for the women. Due to limited services, they are unable to make the most of a range of opportunities in the area or to maximise their access to other services. Time poverty is a big issue for women in the area often due to the tensions between inadequate transport and distance to get to service providers.

“Job opportunities can be lost because transport from A to B is non existent. Shift work is impossible. The cost of a car and driving lessons are impossible on low or no wages.”

Women were critical of the limited services in rural areas outside peak hours and the lack of low level buses for prams, the disabled or elderly. They believe transport issues are very low down in Local Authority priorities and it is their opinion that this is because they are failing to refer to women in the area who depend on public transport.

“Drivers will refuse to let you on if there are other pushchairs and it can be difficult to collapse them while holding a child and shopping.”

Because of issues with public transport, participants confirmed car ownership is considered a fundamental requirement in Moray. For some low income families it is outwith their means but for many more, the essential need for a car is a severe but necessary drain on their budgets.

“There is a high dependency on car travel if living in Moray. You really don’t have an option. Public transport is so restrictive.”

Older women also spoke of their need to continue to maintain a car and continue driving beyond an age they feel confident in doing so out of necessity.

A number of women have attempted to address transport and access issues, an example was given where a group of older women, without cars, asked Tesco if they could shop in person and pay to have their groceries delivered. They were told this would not be possible. The only facility for delivery was through “online shopping”. The women thought this was a very negative response as this would be a service that could help a number of people who are without personal transport including young mothers, pregnant women as well as the elderly and clearly those who do not have on line access.

The participants acknowledged there were no simple solutions to travel and access problems nevertheless some of the barriers might be reduced through more constructive social enterprise agreements between Local Authorities and businesses in the area.

Housing and Fuel Poverty:

Initial comments about housing in Moray raised concern about changes in local housing allocation priorities. It was confirmed that social housing is allocated on a points basis, awarded when specific criteria are met such as overcrowding or dampness. The women expressed concern that the points allocation for a homeless status has been removed. Their understanding is that if you are classed as homeless you are placed on a homeless register in chronological order however homelessness in itself does not prioritise you on the housing list.

“Homeless people are usually put into shared accommodation, if they are in that situation for too long they tend to go backwards rather than forwards.”

The view held by some that homeless numbers were increasing in Moray was supported by the majority of participants and there was concern that vulnerable women would be exposed to further risk because of the bureaucracy of housing application processes.

“Councils are caught up in their own rules at the moment. They need to address the fact that vulnerable people are being “backed up” in the system.”

There was particular worry articulated about the housing situation of women who were victims of male violence. Participants acknowledged the valuable support of Moray Women’s Aid in offering temporary accommodation for women and their children (under 16 years) who were exposed to abusive relationships. However participants were concerned that there was a real shortage of suitable housing available to women trying to move out of refuge accommodation and this could result in reducing refuge availability in the long term and possibly result in some women returning to abusive environments.

“Women should be prioritised in housing waiting lists when they are victims of male violence. By doing this the Local Authority would allow Women’s Aid to provide the widest possible refuge support to women in Moray.”

The group suggested that the importance of family networks were not understood when housing allocations were processed. Several women said locality considerations are imperative for caring responsibilities. Others commented that supportive connections are essential for a number of material and emotional reasons. Being pressured into accepting a house away from familiar communities can isolate family and friends and can be detrimental to a person’s overall emotional wellbeing.

“You can lose you place on the waiting list for refusing 2 places but people want to be housed in their local area.”

The group also discussed the reduction in social housing stock due to the purchasing council housing by sitting tenants. They said this was a real issue in the Moray area particularly in rural areas where supply fell very short of demand. The demise of tied housing allocated to families working in traditional industries in Moray has placed an additional strain in rural housing supply as families who continue to work in these industries and communities struggle to find affordable homes.

Women would welcome more social housing being funded to encourage downsizing for those occupying houses now too large for them to manage. Many of these tenants resist a move as it might mean moving from an area they have always resided in.

“Everyone buys the good council houses and they are not being replaced. Others are living in under populated housing as there aren’t suitable smaller houses for them to move into.”

The women said overall it was vital that housing policy and planning in rural areas should value the social aspects of community as well as the economical aspects. Affordable housing should not mean isolation.

“A variety of services are required to sustain a community. Services such as transport, shops and schools need to be local. These builds on the peripherals of towns are completely without amenities. Building a community environment should be the first thought not the last.”

Views put forward at the Roadshow event about the issues of fuel poverty in Moray mirrored published statistical evidence; the group supported the view that it is a very big issue in the area. Concerns were widespread across age groups and housing circumstances.

“The choice to heat or eat is all too real for a number of people in different circumstances living in this area.”

The need for the Scottish Government to find additional funding to reduce this poverty amongst those on low incomes was considered essential by the group.

Older properties are proving prohibitively expensive to heat as fuel costs rise. For elderly members of the population being asset rich but income poor can be very distressing and frequently pride can prevent them seeking advice on their rights to assistance.

“Grants for insulating old houses do not cover the full cost therefore money still has to be found and for some this is outwith their budgets.”

Those in social housing are finding storage heaters expensive and inefficient and said they are struggling to meet the costs of running ineffective apparatus. They suggested replacement of this form of heating from any social housing property should be a priority for the Local Authority.

“Councils claim that tenants are not doing enough to get the best use of such heaters – this is not the case.”

The reliance on oil and coal to heat rural homes compounded by huge hikes in the prices of these commodities has resulted in an increase in theft of the heating materials from homes in rural communities. Participants believe that dependence on this form of fuel in rural areas should be supported by Government commitment to subsidise costs for those on limited income when market prices are pushed beyond a reasonable benchmark.

The women agreed that Government influence should be robustly exercised with utility companies to ensure the sizeable profits enjoyed by these companies are not sustained through exploitation of customer pricing.

Health:

Health was the subject of protracted debate among the participants and there was clearly difficulty with issues of access and provision for the women in the Moray area.

The participants made it very clear they commended the efforts of health service staff in the area. However, they said understaffing and budget restrictions were negatively affecting the level of services available to patients and the ability of staff to deliver a standard of care that ensured the overall wellbeing of patients.

“I feel for staff in Dr Grays hospital – they can’t do anything about the limited resources.”

There was a great deal of dissatisfaction about the limited availability of services at Dr Grays and the need to travel much further afield for specialised care.

“Dr Grays suffers because it is small, the services provided relate population of Elgin and Moray, but I don’t think it is able to deliver the medical specialties it should given the size of Moray.”

Having to travel to Aberdeen or Inverness for relatively quick procedures was particularly difficult for a number of participants at the best of times, in bad weather it can be a trying and exhausting journey. The women would like to see an expansion in the local services particularly in testing and initial examination processes. Increasing the mobility of specialised staff and using video linking for certain conditions was thought to be a creative means of ensuring services were brought to the area instead of requiring patients to undertake multiple, lengthy journeys

Maternity provision was also criticised due to a lack of full services and what the women viewed as understaffing. The requirement to be moved to Inverness if you need a procedure like an epidural was not considered an appropriate service for the women of Moray.

“Women in any area need to be reassured by the presence of full maternity services nearby, particularly rural women. If labour becomes complicated when they arrive at the unit the last thing they need is to be moved on again. It can be alarming.”

A number of women had experienced a lack of support in the Maternity Unit which they felt was as a result of limited staff numbers. Some commented on priority being given to first time mothers and if they were in the majority then staff priorities could leave returning mothers struggling with issues not experienced in their previous births. Others had issues about the number of available staff at night especially if it was busy.

“I had an evening delivery however did not get the opportunity to shower until the next day. I had to remain in soiled clothing which was very unpleasant.”

Care of the Elderly and Mental Health provision, including Drug and Alcohol Services, were considered to be under resourced by participants. It was suggested these services were given a much lower priority than other health issues. The women felt this was despite a growing elderly population and the undue influence alcohol has on the wellbeing of rising numbers of the population in Moray, including the young.

The ambulance service in the Moray area was also an issue of concern for the women who felt life could be seriously compromised if there were multiple emergencies.

“The ambulance service is not sufficient for needs. There is one ambulance in Elgin and if there are two emergencies an ambulance has to come from another station. There have been occasions where the ambulance has got lost as they did not know the local area.”

Dental services were particularly highlighted as being deficient in the Moray area and the women said access to a dentist was becoming critical in the area.

“The hospital dentist will only do emergency treatment you have to get registered with a dentist for follow up work but there are no dentists taking patients.”

The withdrawal of dental service which had previously existed have been particularly felt and are seen as a further drop in standards of health care in the region.

“There are a lot of dentists in the region who were NHS but have since gone private and NHS exemptions don’t count with them.”

“There used to be a mobile dentist service for children which went out to Lhanbryde but this doesn’t exist anymore.”

Younger participants said the loss of the Health Point drop in centre in the High Street in Elgin was an access point to Sexual Health Services that would be keenly missed by teenagers who would be much less inclined to travel to Dr Grays Hospital to engage with these services.

“It’s a mistake – young people could be more at risk of STI’s and pregnancy as they will not go to the hospital for advice and practical information – it is too intimidating an environment.”

GP services were considered by some to be inconsistent and improvements a bit too random in application to offer overall benefits to some communities. For some the lack of pharmacy service is an issue and others found centralising Health Services more difficult to access than community surgeries.

“Moray Coast Health Centre was built recently at one end of Elgin and difficult to get to.”

Although withdrawn some time ago, the loss of the district nurse service was considered a big set back for rural communities. There was widespread disappointment amongst the elderly and parents of young children that home visits had been curtailed by many G.P. practices.

“If you’re on benefits and have no money at the end of the week after paying bills and food and the kids get sick then you just have to walk – there is no money for transport – what else can you do when there is such resistance to coming out?”

Participants who were elderly and those with children felt particularly vulnerable when access to their GP’s is limited by inflexible appointment systems. The sudden onset of illness can curtail approaches for medical help when it is most needed. The women said explaining symptoms to reception staff can be daunting and accessing appointments urgently fairly problematic.

Childcare:

From the feedback the SWC receive at all of our Roadshow events it is evident that a lack of appropriate, affordable childcare is a major barrier for women in Scotland in relation to equality of opportunity and financial wellbeing. It is the one thing women across Scotland unanimously want the Scottish Government to tackle. The women we spoke to in Moray underlined this position robustly.

Participants feel a great deal of exasperation that new welfare reform proposals are forcing them back to work when their youngest child is seven despite the serious lack of afterschool care availability and the political disregard for the costs involved when set against what is frequently low income wages.

“After school clubs in the area cost around £8 per day per child and in school holidays the cost is around £20 per child. How is this supposed to be sustainable on low wages?”

The women strongly felt that the role of parenting is undervalued by both the Westminster and Scottish Governments and forcing mothers into the workplace will leave a lot of family units in time poverty as well being economically worst off.

“There is absolutely no value placed on the guidance and nurturing of our children. Women will still be expected to be the main carers and balance work and home commitments yet also be criticised if the children lack stability or guidance.”

The lack of flexibility and the cost of childcare provision leave many women with impossible work and home choices and employers continue to discriminate on the basis of this knowledge.

“Securing well paid work is hard in this current climate however if you have children your chances are even less as employers know there is little flexibility with childcare arrangements and they don't want to know if a child gets sick or anything.”

The women also remarked on the bureaucracy surrounding childcare particularly where it has resulted in the demise of local initiatives to provide some forms of child care even at a minimum level.

“There used to be a lot of playgroups but these cannot afford to exist in certain areas any more – the council stopped playgroups from functioning last year.”

Whilst they agree the welfare and safety of a child is paramount they are also of the opinion that too much red tape is diminishing the numbers of childcare providers available. The cost of disclosures and training for those involved with playgroups and after school clubs etc can be expensive. The participants agree the requirement is important however they would welcome greater corroboration between assessment agencies and improved subsidy initiatives to support these small local childcare groups which offer a valued service to small communities.

“A lot of people want to make things better but there is no coordination between relevant authorities, agencies and voluntary groups – they are not talking to each other and the only outcome is excuses why things don't improve.”

The women said the both the Westminster and Scottish Governments have to be a lot more flexible in the policy planning and support of childcare. Only by doing so will they provide a real choice for families and lift a significant number of children out of poverty deciles.

Participants do not support the view that universal nursery education from age 3 addresses the issues of wrap around childcare in Scotland for those in low income categories.

“Two and a half hours a day in term time is not childcare provision, it is early education, and that is what they don’t seem to grasp. More has to be done to make childcare affordable.”

While child tax credits are a welcome contribution to the cost of childcare they do not reflect the true outlay for many families nor the payment conditions imposed to procure care. The women say that increasing tax credits for low incomes to ensure that employment does pay and offering a choice of how tax credits were paid would provide more real opportunity for women.

“Some childcare providers require you to pay upfront for a full term; some of them it is two terms at the very start which can cost over £1000 – how is this possible for a lot of families?”

The complex pattern of childcare arrangements with a mix of formal and informal care is a strain on the lives of so many women in Scotland and sustainability is particularly difficult for those in rural areas where access to childcare is limited and job income low. The necessity for multiple providers to cover childcare can mean work/life balance becomes untenable for women balancing employment and the need to negotiate the cost and time of travelling between carers.

Participants also said legislation further complicated matters with too much rigidity in benefit assessment which prevents commonsense evaluation of income versus compliance requirements. The fragility of income between benefit allowances and low paid employment can mean financial outlay for childcare will leave families economically worse off.

“Some women can’t take the jobs because they will be worse off from losing benefits. Qualifying for benefits should be assessed on whether your income will actually reduce through work and associated costs such as travel and childcare. ”

Caring:

Participants also thought that there is more than a casual relationship between issues of childcare and wider familial caring responsibilities placed on women. It was unanimously agreed that there is a significant impact on the economic welfare of women in Scotland due to the level of unpaid caring undertaken by them. A level of caring which they feel is unacknowledged in terms of public policy and political will.

“The role of the unpaid carer in society, usually women, is completely ignored by policymakers.”

Older women are feeling the stress and economic pressures of providing an array of unpaid long term care within family groups. As people are living longer the middle generation of women are faced with care responsibilities for grandchildren plus care for aged parents. A sizeable number of women in Scotland are consequently financially constrained due to the unpaid nature of their “work” and have very limited prospects of securing retirement funds that will lift them out of a poverty level of income.

“Women who undertake unpaid caring provide an important contribution to the economy of this country however do not enjoy equality of income or pension entitlement. It is grossly unfair.”

The group also wanted included in their feedback the need for work in the care industry to be appraised in terms of responsibilities and skills. It is their strongly held opinion that wider society holds the view women are “naturally” inclined towards caring therefore the proficiency involved is without financial merit. They would welcome Scottish Government support to encourage industry employers to improve wage levels in this sector.

The lack of respite care availability for those who provide familial caring was also a contentious for participants who expressed concern for diminishing resources to provide this service in Moray.

“Places like Tor-na-dee provided a good service however that’s been withdrawn now.”

Participants said that the level of family care undertaken in Scotland requires greater resourcing of respite facilities to ensure the wellbeing of the carer is also given primary consideration in any care relationship.

Improving Lives – What the Scottish Government should do?

The women from Moray told the SWC:

- Subsidise local travel for low income families to improve choice and employment opportunities.
- Transport companies should be encouraged to provide more low level bus services and publish accurate timetable information when these services are available.
- More Scottish Government initiatives to ensure rural communities prosper rather than decline – encourage investment and provide resources to improve access to services.
- Improve political awareness at local and national level about rural living issues.
- Social Housing budgets should be proportionally spread throughout the region. There should be a wider remit to focus on housing needs in smaller communities without resources always being prioritised for the 3 main towns.
- Improve rural access to services – transport and health in particular.
- Improve fuel subsidies and energy efficiency support for the older population, especially those who may be asset rich but income poor.
- Better broadband access for rural Moray.
- Improve communication links between services and potential service users.
- Increase women’s refuge provision across the area for victims of male violence.
- Greater understanding from Policy Makers and Local Authorities around the disproportionate and discriminatory effect poverty has on women and children.
- The Scottish Government should improve their partnership working with communities in a holistic way to provide real long term benefits for the community not just short term gains.
- Acknowledge that “discrete” services are not always possible in rural communities where individuals are known. Creative thinking is required such as improved technology – video conferencing or other IT links.

SWC Recommendations

Employment

- In rural areas the compounding effects of more expensive goods and services mean minimum wage rates do not make work pay. The SWC strongly support the need for living wage employment rates to be robustly supported by the Scottish Government.
- The SWC would welcome efforts to improve skill development and encourage enterprise growth that focuses on opportunities for women in the Moray area.

Older Women

- The SWC support the view that pension provision for women is seriously undermined by the gender pay gap, unpaid kinship care and the predominance of part-time working in the area. The SWC would welcome strong Scottish Government representation to Westminster to address this inequality in pension provision.

Access to Services

- The SWC are aware that lack of accessibility to some local services is included in the Moray Local Authority deprivation index; however it receives a relatively low weighing. The SWC therefore believe material and non material resources for rural communities in Moray need to be improved and the capacity to access these resources increased.

Transport

- The SWC support the view that there must be more efficient planning and investment by the Scottish Government and transport providers to make available transport solutions that work for rural communities.

Housing and Fuel Poverty

- The SWC support the Scottish Government in their recent housing initiatives however we would welcome greater emphasis on ensuring community facilities are considered at the outset of any new developments.
- The SWC also believe social housing in rural areas must encompass building to ensure older residents can remain in appropriate housing within their communities.
- The SWC support the view that homelessness should remain a priority in housing waiting lists in Moray and in particular for women who are trying to leave refuge accommodation in the area.
- Fuel poverty presents particular challenges in rural communities where supply is often limited and is an acute problem due to rising costs aggravated by restricted fuel choice, house types and lower income. The SWC would welcome initiatives from the Scottish Government to improve support to low income families in these areas. (cont. over page)

Health

- In order to reduce the need for protracted travel for patients in the Moray area the SWC support the view that improving access to acute services should be a priority for the area Health Board.
- The SWC strongly support the view that increased efforts should be made in Moray to provide people centred health services to rural areas. The SWC are particularly concerned about the lack of dental services and out of hours G.P. services in rural communities.

Childcare

- Due to the fundamental barrier it creates for many women across Scotland in achieving equality of opportunity, the SWC make no apologies for restating this recommendation. We strongly support the need for provision of affordable, appropriate and accessible wrap around childcare to be made a policy priority by the Scottish Government.
- In support of this position the SWC would welcome robust and persistent Scottish Government representation to Westminster to increase the childcare element of tax credits.

Caring

- The SWC strongly believe the unpaid nature of kinship care carried out by mainly women in Scotland is an economic contribution to the country being consistently ignored by policymakers. The SWC would welcome substantial policy initiatives to be made to rectify this discrimination.
- The SWC would welcome Scottish Government engagement with the Care industry to improve wage rates. Respect for the work undertaken by employees in the care industry will not improve until the low income expectations are addressed. The SWC are disappointed that care of the most vulnerable in our society is undertaken with a great deal of commitment from most employee who receive minimum rate wages.
- Respite care is an essential part of the holistic care of those being cared for and the carer. The SWC strongly support the view that improving access to respite care must be a focus for the Scottish Government as part of its ongoing Healthcare Strategy.

If you require further information or copies of this report please contact Isabelle Lannon, SWC Policy Officer on 0141 248 8186 or email isabelle.lannon@scottishwomensconvention.org



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