

2010

The Scottish Women's Convention

Report on Fraserburgh Roadshow

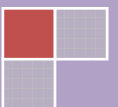
June 2010

The Scottish Women's Convention believes any public sector cuts will have a profound impact on women.

Our 2010 Roadshow programme ensures women in Scotland have an opportunity to express their views on the potential affects of spending cuts on them, their families and communities.

The SWC Roadshow Reports identify a number of key services women have said should be protected.

*Agnes Tolmie
Chair SWC*



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 Fraserburgh 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 Fraserburgh took place at the Royal Hotel, Broad Street on Friday 11th June 2010.

The focus for discussion was centred on the potential impact of budget cuts for public service users, an assessment of positive aspects to living in the area and participant recommendations for improving opportunity or circumstances in the region.

The SWC would like to thank the women who attended the event for a very productive and enjoyable day and those who contributed their views by phone and email for their valuable input.

In their responses to this question the women recognised that public finances would be subject to review and cutbacks in many areas across Scotland.

There was acknowledgment that Government spending constraints would ultimately impact frontline services and also the funding of many organisations in the voluntary sector. There was widespread concern that initially a crude cutting of budgets would prevail and social and economic exclusion would be exacerbated as a result.

“It is so important that the ability to maintain a reasonable subsistence or get support should not have to become critical before assistance from public services becomes accessible or warranted.”

During discussions the frequent use of words such as “fairness”, “justice”, “inclusion” and “opportunity” underpinned widespread belief that funding distribution in Aberdeenshire should be allocated on the basis of need rather than an area based “scatter strategy”.

“Resources are wasted through lack of planning. Not everything is needed everywhere”

It was agreed that listening to what communities are saying is more important than formulating strategy based on endless academic study and rolling it out everywhere.

“Ask the users and don’t continue with bad ideas. Take account of local priorities.”

Equality

Respondents suggested equality programmes, particularly women-focused initiatives, have frequently been a first casualty of Local Authority (LA) budget restrictions. Several women held the view that too often budget priorities were defined by short term measureable results as opposed to addressing longer term social and economic disparity.

Comments were strongly in support of government bodies and public service providers being vigorous in undertaking and publicly reporting on their gender impact assessment processes. The women believed this was a key component in budget planning to protect against any regression of gender based funding provision in a time of austerity.

Regeneration

Regeneration programmes were considered important providers of holistic support in the Banff and Buchan Region. Participants agreed wholeheartedly that these initiatives offer constructive frameworks to assist individuals and families to rebuild or improve aspects of their lives.

The UK Government has announced a number of cuts to public services.

The Scottish Government Budget will also be affected.

What key services in your area do you believe should be protected and why?

The Hot Spot¹ in Peterhead was offered as an example of a positive and successful regeneration initiative. The women confirmed that funding and indeed expansion of this type of facility was of critical importance to the area and was a springboard to self determination and independent living for many living with multiple issues of hardship and deprivation.

In this respect the Working for Families organisation was also viewed as an important contributor to improving the lives of women and their families in the last few years, particularly by increasing opportunities for employment and skills development.

There was strong indication that engaging directly with service users and frontline workers would provide those who allocate public funds a greater insight into the potential consequences of budgeting decisions.

“I think it is important that decision makers make a real effort to understand the impact of budget decisions. Awareness needs to be informed by more than quick visits and photo opportunities.”

Social Housing

Protecting funding for the supply of suitable, affordable social housing was undisputed and the group considered it one of the main priorities for the area. A number of participants had experienced the pressures of long term waiting on the local housing list and it was clear the experiences had an adverse effect on numerous areas of their lives.

“Being without a house or being unable to afford a home undermines any efforts to improve your life.”

The use of Bed and Breakfast accommodation for women and children was heavily criticised. The type of accommodation provided can expose vulnerable individuals to harmful environments where their complex social problems can be intensified and their fragile stability and security lost.

“Temporary accommodation does not solve the housing problems of communities. You can be forced to share facilities with people with various problems including substance misuse. You can feel safer out in the street.”

Concerns were highlighted that cutting housing funds will put additional pressure on families to accommodate relatives, resulting in increasing instances of overcrowding.

Alternatively, a lack of local social housing options may force individuals away from the support of relatives to look for places on housing lists in other regions. They said single parents, the majority of whom are women, can find themselves socially and economically isolated in these circumstances.

¹ The Hot Spot in Kirk Street, Peterhead was established to meet the aims of Aberdeenshire’s regeneration outcome agreement; It acts as a one stop shop for information and advice on a range of issues including housing matters, money issues, health and wellbeing, steps to employment and educational opportunities.

Whilst the women welcomed new building such as the fifty houses built in Denmark Street by Langstane Homes, they believe capacity is a long way from meeting housing needs in the north east.

Comments were made that a lack of consistent approach in assessment and allocation processes had also diminished confidence that resources are fairly allotted. The awarding of housing points bewilders many on housing lists and the distribution of community care grants were said to be almost a lottery.

“There is absolutely no consistency in the application process for this grant. It can simply be a lottery, depending on when you apply and who processes it.”

Alcohol and Substance Misuse Services

Services and support for those who have substance misuse issues were seen to be beneficial for the community as a whole. Continued funding to tackle dependence was felt to be essential. It was stressed that problems presented by addiction and dependence in the region would definitely become worse should vital support services have funding significantly curtailed.

“A lot of people do want to move on but can’t, the wait to get on programmes is very limited and there is a long wait in this area. Getting the right help when you are most receptive is so important to getting clean and staying that way.”

Participants were very keen to press home the far reaching impact of substance misuse not only on individuals but wider family members and the cost to the community.

“Alcohol misuse is a bigger problem here than drugs but because it is legal there is less admission that it is responsible for a lot of social problems and costs to the public.”

The importance of protecting support services for those with dependency issues was feedback and concern expressed that individuals suffering from substance misuse were being declined medical assistance, including treatment for conditions not directly associated with their dependence or habit. Local practices are known to be reluctant to offer treatment to those with substance dependency. Without the dedicated substance abuse services these individuals would have severely limited access to health associated care.

Participants also believed outreach initiatives for addiction services were often the first casualties of spending cuts and yet they offered the most direct access to support for the most excluded in society. Maintaining funding for this type of support was strongly advocated by the group. An example of positive support in the area for those with problematic abuse issues was Pitstop.²

“Inclusion is the important word here. A subculture is being created by the way we are dealing with certain members of our society.”

² Pitstop is one of the services provided by Turning Point Scotland. It provides a supported housing service for people who are experiencing chaos in their lives through homelessness and substance use; enabling them to develop the personal resources necessary to maintain their own homes in the future. www.turningpointscotland.com

Services for Migrant Workers and their Families

Supporting an inclusive society also underpinned comments regarding the pressures presented to public services in the area as a result of the influx of migrants to the region, mostly from Eastern European countries.

Participants believed concern regarding the need to protect services to this community were due to the lack of forward planning and resource allocation to fully facilitate integration and not based on inherent racism in the local population. Nonetheless, the service pressures on the community were clearly having an adverse impact on both the indigenous and incoming populations.

“There used to be reasonable support for a few families but the numbers have grown. We need to ensure the services are protected.”

The women illustrated their concerns regarding a lack of resources targeted at this issue by commenting on the need for improved translation and support services in all levels of education. They also believed enhancing the assistance available to migrant workers and their families to complete disclosure checks would encourage greater uptake in local community volunteering. There was widespread support for the view that not enough was done by Local Authorities to encourage social engagement amongst different cultures and this should be a built-in essential in local authority spending to promote inclusion.

There was consensus that in the last 20-30 years economic changes and the impact of this on traditional employment had resulted in a decline in living standards for some and arguably an improvement for others. This had clearly influenced individual perceptions of the wellbeing and material benefits the region offered.

“Some families have profited a lot by the vast changes in the fishing industry, for others the trickle effect of change was a loss of job and a way of life”

At the same time high income earners, more usually employed in Aberdeen, added to the widening of disparity in local income deciles. What emerged from feedback was that Banff and Buchan was seen by most participants as an area of sharply contrasting levels of deprivation, income and affluence. Recommendations about the region would be clearly influenced by this and the economic circumstances of any incomers.

“It can seem very much a have or have not environment with little middle ground.”

In their efforts to agree the main attributes of living in the area the women felt compelled to comment on the media coverage both Peterhead and Fraserburgh had experienced in recent years. The towns were frequently cited as portraying examples of a variety of social exclusion issues including joblessness and substance misuse. The group was in no doubt that this negative coverage made it harder to attract investment and promote improvement in overall value judgments about the area on a national level.

The most positive aspects of living in the area feedback impressed upon the SWC were:

The Natural Resources

Participants were widely complimentary of the wonderful beaches and scenery in the area and the opportunities for exploring the surroundings. The women endorsed these natural attributes very positively and said they would welcome a commitment from the local authority and Scottish Government that investment in local resources and amenities would complement and add value to the assets of the natural habitat. Improving the attractiveness and amenities available in town centres were considered important areas of focus to boost overall environmental value the area.

“There is the capacity for everyone here to have a good lifestyle but we need investment in the fabric of the community, many aspects don't look positive or vibrant.”

It was apparent that the women wanted to see more consultation and accountability by local councils on public amenity spending priorities.

What reasons would you give if you were asked to promote your area of Scotland to people from other countries or other parts of the UK who express an interest in coming to live in the area?

The Local People

There was a strong sense of belonging and a confidence that the people are warm and welcoming. There was a shared belief in the resilience of the community, particularly among women, who have a tradition of self reliance as a result of men going away for extended periods in the fishing industry. Most respondents presented a very positive attitude that the local population has the attributes and resolve to make the area an attractive community for living, working and visiting.

Education

The overall high standard of education which is available in schools in the area was widely complimented. Women said pre school, primary school and secondary education provided children with an excellent grounding to pursue higher education opportunities or skill based training in the future.

Particular mention was made of the excellent reputation of Banff and Buchan College. It was felt that young people who remain in the region to pursue further education are provided with an excellent programme of courses and the college environment is extremely inclusive and encouraging of life long learning.

What key recommendations would you make to the Scottish Government to effect positive change in your area of Scotland?

The women presented a number of recommendations and argued they could all be defined as issues of accessibility. The issues identified by them were believed to pose very real barriers to many families and individuals in the area in terms of time, income and financial outgoings.

The women said addressing access availability would achieve a substantial return for the region in terms of living costs, health, employment prospects and social inclusion.

Internet Access and Community Hubs

It was agreed that internet help lines were a useful means of overcoming both privacy and distance barriers. However, reliance on them to educate and inform a wider community was dependent on availability, particularly reliable affordable broadband connection. The women would welcome improvements in Broadband coverage in the area.

There was also positive support for increasing mobility of provision, a *“take it to the people”* approach for those who are without internet connection or find the use of this communication medium daunting

“Have Community Days or Health Fairs. Have local traders involved and bring services to us.”

Dental Services

This issue was widely debated and came extremely high on the recommendations for positive change in the region. The dearth of National Health Dental Practitioners to service the needs of the population was considered to be a very pressing issue. For many families it causes inconvenience and cost in terms of travel to locate an available dentist or potential economic hardship if forced to absorb the expense of private provision.

Suitable Affordable Childcare

There was strong support for recommending the Scottish Government improve the availability and reduce the cost of childcare, particularly in terms of the limited provision and prohibitive cost of after school and holiday care provision.

Local Amenities for young people

The group said that ensuring activities were not solely *“organised with ulterior motives”* was important as young people wanted to feel that at least some of the activities open to them locally were a socialising occasion rather than an opportunity for coercion by third parties.

The group did provide examples of recent events for young people such as a “Band Night” and a “Chill Out” venue at the Community Centre. This sort of activity was thought to be a positive attempt to provide more for teenagers but it did not go far enough to fill the gap for young people in the area.

“There is very little for young people. Those who work in the oil or fishing industries can have access to a lot of cash but with nothing to do the alternatives can lead down a slippery slope.”

Transport

The cost, frequency and suitability of public transport were inextricably linked to wider issues of accessibility. There was a great deal of criticism levelled at current service provision and whether it was actually meeting the needs of the community in terms of service timings and routes. Additionally, services to other locations are almost always routed through Aberdeen which lengthens journey times and adds to travel costs.³

“All roads lead to Aberdeen city but getting about the rest of Aberdeenshire is a big problem without private transport.”

Women indicated they would welcome more pram and wheelchair accessible buses, limited local disembarking at peak times on the Aberdeen route and more free “Park and Ride” facilities around Aberdeenshire as an initial means of improving accessibility in the region.

Provisions of affordable, integrated transport links were considered a priority recommendation.

Employment

Linked to improved transport provision was the accessibility to a wider job market and greater employment opportunities. Smaller communities lack direct transport links with main centres of employment. Without independent means of travel there is reliance on others for transport to bus routes or places of work. For women with dependent families this poses greater time poverty and a consequential reduction of employment opportunity and is particularly limiting in terms of acquiring work based skills, a living wage and a route out of benefit dependency.

³ Example - Fraserburgh to Inverness direct 100 miles approx time 2hrs 19 minutes. By public transport must travel to Aberdeen then on to Inverness 144 miles and 3hrs 27 minutes without adding schedule time. (AA route planner)

If you require further information or additional copies of this report please contact
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All SWC reports and consultation responses can be accessed on our website
<http://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/what-we-do.asp>



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