

2010

# The Scottish Women's Convention

## Report on Lochinver Roadshow

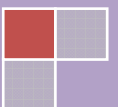
July 2010

*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 Lochinver 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 took place at the Lochinver Village Hall on Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> July 2010.**

The focus for discussion was centred on the potential impact of budget cuts for public service users particularly in a remote rural locality, 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.

The women who attended and additionally those who contributed written responses demonstrated to the SWC a very positive message of community resilience and adaptability.

They said living in sparsely inhabited areas within the largest local government region in Scotland requires an acceptance that certain services and provisions are difficult to access. Faced with the reality of cuts the sustainability of many remote rural communities is dependent on the resolve of the local population to overcome service deficiencies. For this reason the women were wholehearted about ensuring any limited public resources available to them are protected.

Discussions on any proposed frontline service cuts indicated that any “*slash and burn*” approaches to reducing public spending would have an immediate impact on the resilience of rural households to survive and on the long term durability of the rural economy.

*“Public service access and provision is already extremely finite in this area and the possibility that it could diminish further is a source of real anxiety both to individuals and wider rural community here.”*

The women highlighted a number of services areas where widespread cuts would have a particular bearing on the lives of women and their families in the remote regions of Sutherland.

### **Health and Wellbeing**

There were wide-ranging concerns expressed regarding any Government expenditure cuts reducing health provision. Women suggested provision in the area was “*barely adequate*”. It was said the present level of service was already so stretched or intermittent that a sense of feeling “*vulnerable and exposed*” in relation to potentially serious or long term health concerns was prevalent amongst locals with a variety of healthcare profiles.

*“Worrying about health services is common among all different families. A lack access to local health services can deter people from settling here which is not good for the community as a whole.”*

Several women highlighted the profound impact previous restructures within the Health Service has had on the Highland region as a whole and particularly the remote rural areas of the west coast. The loss of the District Nursing services as a point of regular medical contact and overall welfare has been keenly felt in this area, particularly among older or less able inhabitants. Preserving the services of an adequate number of **Health Visitors** within the area was therefore crucial.

**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 women identified a robust willingness among the community to provide a measure of health related services where none existed. As an example, they pointed to the work of local volunteers in providing basic first aid and oxygen via a vehicle supplied by the **Scottish Ambulance Service**. This is a very rudimentary service in terms of any emergency response as volunteers are not medically qualified; nonetheless losing funding for the equipment and vehicle would be a serious blow to the district.

The community takeover of the local care home for the elderly was also highlighted to illustrate the actions taken to ensure a level of basic provision continued through local endeavour. Overall **Care Support** generally were a central topic in discussions regarding the protection of key services. It was also considered crucial to protect **Free Care for the Elderly** in order that those who wanted to stay in their homes as long as possible were given the support to do so. It was stated that there was a genuine fear amongst elderly or infirmed inhabitants that any full time care assessment would require a move to residential care outside the locality and away from familiar people and surroundings due to diminishing local access.

In a region where women were largely dependent on **Health Service and Local Authority employment**, public sector redundancies would have a serious impact on job availability for them. It was the opinion of participants that Public Service jobs and salaries must be protected. It was also noted that alternative job roles for women locally were frequently in private sector care services which were notoriously offered at minimum rate wage levels. It was widely believed these roles were depriving women of a livable income and compromising care service standards.

*“Care services in the area are very “hit and miss” it is very difficult as so few people to provide the care as it is not worth taking on the roles because of very low wages.”*

While local solutions can fill gaps in a number of service areas a key health factor for the community was undoubtedly access to **qualified doctors** in this remote rural region. It was said that the current reliance on NHS 24 to respond to out of hours medical advice and assistance does not instill those who live in remote rural areas with enough assurances that, should the need arise. A number of individuals confirmed they are less confident about living independently or in remote rural locations as a result. There was unease amongst participants that any spending cuts would further reduce the trained medical care available locally.

The critical lack of access to **National Health Dental Services** in the Highlands has been well documented in previous SWC Roadshow reports and the women of Lochinver added their voice to the need to protect these services where they still existed.

It was generally agreed that maintaining a holistic health and wellbeing support network in a rural area is much more difficult, in terms of funding and long-term commitment, when public spending is being tightly squeezed. Nevertheless, the women believed an obligation to provide adequate health service provision in rural areas should not be subject to vacillations of the economy.

*“The Health Service seems to be a postcode lottery not a universally equal service. Rural areas should not continue to miss out on vital care services because of funding excuses. We all pay National Insurance on the same income basis.”*

## Violence Against Women (VAW)

The economic difficulties in maintaining public and voluntary sector services in such a thinly populated area were not lost on the women, particularly in resourcing outreach services and reasonable localised access to residential facilities. That said there was overwhelming endorsement from the women for VAW services to be protected.

*“Isolation can be a symptom of rural living but when you are a victim of gender based violence the isolation can extend the exposure to and tolerance of abuse.”*

It was suggested that the decline of “neutral” local contacts, such as Health Visitors, reduced opportunities for women to disclose abuse. The women said VAW services in Caithness and Sutherland are a much needed resource and even with current funding provision services are “choc-a-block” full at every level of support requirement.

They also said it was imperative that VAW resources were ring-fenced at a national and local government level to ensure that women experiencing abuse, wherever their locality, are within reach of localised support.

*“In rural communities there are huge barriers to women accessing VAW services. Organisations must have sufficient funds to be more accessible and able to accommodate regional needs.”*

## Housing

Sustaining investment in affordable housing stock in Sutherland and Caithness was strongly supported in all feedback received. The prospect of a substantial reduction in resources available to deliver suitable affordable homes for purchase or rent was viewed as a serious barrier to improving community growth, employment and increasing school rolls.

*“Growth is vital to the area both in terms of people and economic output. It won’t happen without the houses.”*

It was the opinion of the women that local housing availability has been undermined by the high number of second homes in the area. This factor drove up house purchase prices for locals and seriously reduced credible opportunities for essential workers or younger local families getting on the housing ladder. The women would welcome pursuit of wider sources of finance by the Highland Council and the Scottish Government to generate investment in affordable housing for rural communities.

They also stressed the need for the Westminster Government to exercise greater influence in encouraging lenders to provide affordable and viable mortgage options for young people. While shared equity home ownership is available in some areas it was not thought to be common in the North West and it was widely seen as a positive option for first time buyers.

*“Many of our young people would like to stay in the area but just can’t afford to do so.”*

The lack of social housing availability was unanimously viewed as a critical problem for the area and one that most participants considered a key service that must retain, as a minimum, current levels of public spending budget allocation. A few responses referred to the current high level of Highland Council Housing debt and the onerous impact this will have on the funds available should spending on social housing be reduced.

In their discussions regarding housing a significant number of the women also commented on the Common Housing Register (CHR)<sup>1</sup> and the substantial impact they consider it has on reducing the availability of *"local housing for local needs"*. Participants said that the allocation of social housing using this system fails to priorities the needs of local families in remote rural areas.

*"It may work in more urban areas but for those on the waiting list in rural areas in can seem very unfair when points apply throughout the Highlands."*

### **Community Services**

There was a collective view that preserving the current level of services as a minimum was vital for a range of facilities that undoubtedly serve a multiple function in the lives of rural communities.

**Library Services** were seen as being of particular importance as they are frequently the only means of high speed Broadband access in the area. Additionally they fulfilled an important communication and information hub for rural inhabitants.

*"Achiltibuie library is a vital local service – the library service pays the village hall which helps the hall survive – it is one of the most used libraries in the north west of Scotland."*

**Post Office Services** were also unanimously identified as a key service that this remote rural area depended on and were viewed as crucial to support local access to the wider communication network and other non postal services.

The value placed on local access to **Community Hubs** cannot be underestimated a number of women said and were particularly important as a source of learning and empowerment in areas with very limited access to local participation networks.

*"Assynt Leisure Centre in Lochinver is a lifesaver. A lot of people would like to ensure places like this are protected as it is a learning centre, a place for young people and connects to all sorts of other services."*

Women said that very often in the recent past the reduction or loss of any of services in the North West of Scotland has been more usually considered on a cost/benefit basis without meaningful consultation on the impact on the communities served. It was stressed the longer term consequence on local communities is not so easy to assess.

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<sup>1</sup> These enable households to register on the housing list for an entire local authority area rather than register separately with each landlord.

The group spoke of the overall importance of policy alternatives being shaped on the basis that remote rural communities should be supported in sustaining themselves. Just as vital in their view was the need for central and local government politicians to understand the why, the how and the who of rural service users before wielding cuts on these already vulnerable communities.

There was overwhelming agreement that wholesale cuts to service provision or funding streams as a means of reducing costs are more likely to have a greater impact on communities where access or provision is, by reason of location or population density, already extremely restricted.

Responses to this question were extremely constructive and identified explicitly the positive aspects of living in this region.

**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 Quality of Life

Being located in an area of outstanding natural beauty was seen as a very favourable aspect of living in the North West of Scotland. It was suggested that the inclination to return to the area was common for those who had left for work or further education. The women said this could be viewed as an endorsement of the overall quality of life the environs provided when local people returned to bring up their families in the communities they were raised in.

### The Sense of Community

The comments of the women indicated a real and enthusiastic sense of engagement with the community and a tolerance and acceptance of social, economic and ethnic diversity.

*“You are who you are here it doesn’t matter. What matters is what you do in the community.”*

The engagement and interaction socially between generations was also seen as a mutually supportive community relationship that encouraged confidence and respect. The spontaneity of many aspects of rural existence coupled a willingness to adapt and improvise provided cohesion and inclusion in their communities that participants thought was missing in large towns and cities.

*“Here it just happens, that’s the meaning of community.”*

### Education

Although participants were anxious about diminishing numbers attending local schools and the potential this could have on local access to education they expressed a confidence and satisfaction regarding the schooling children received. The long daily journey time for some pupils attending school in Ullapool might be viewed negatively but the transport provided ensures boarding is not a requirement and this is seen as a reasonable compromise for rural families.

### Feeling of Safety

What also came through in responses was the overall feeling of safety and freedom from danger enjoyed by every age group. This was said to be underpinned by the very low level of victim based crime and added immeasurably to the stability and security enjoyed by those living in the surrounding communities.

Feedback unequivocally focused on sustainability of the remote rural communities in this area of Caithness and Sutherland.

The women would welcome a commitment at both local and national level that future policy decisions will consider the uniqueness of this area of Scotland in terms of its capacity, potential and infrastructure.

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

*“We don’t expect politicians to make the area something it isn’t but improving on some services could make a lot of difference.”*

### **Affordable Housing**

All participants felt compelled to restate their concerns about the lack of affordable housing in the area. They said for them it was the single most important issue for the sustainability of the area in the longer term. The subject of holiday lets and second home ownership was a further topic when discussing housing related recommendations. Most women concurred that it significantly pressurised both the availability and affordability of local housing in an area dependent on tourism. There was unanimity that affordable housing for rent or purchase was a crucial link in overcoming community dependence on one economic sector, creation of other employment opportunities and widening the indigenous population profile.

*“Tourism is important but we are not just a playground or big version of Centre Parcs. We need people to stay and work but they can’t if they have to wait years for a house.”*

### **Local Amenities for Young People**

Women said there was a need for a sustained Scottish Government focus on improving and extending the access to facilities and services for young people in this region. Remoteness from various social and entertainment venues were a factor in the overall isolation felt by teenagers. It was argued that providing access to focal points for localised interaction and peer engagement was essential for building confidence and widening social networks. It was considered that access to stimulating social environments would do much to counteract the increasing numbers of young rural teenagers resorting to drugs or alcohol for recreation.

### **Transport**

This raised a series of complex issues and addressing these as a Government priority would immeasurably reduce a number of physical and financial barriers imposed on those living in the remote Highlands of Scotland. Women said that the **condition of the roads** in the area were unacceptable and posed a huge problem in terms of access and safety particularly in severe weather. These poor conditions increased the possibility of road traffic accidents and added to the financial outlay of families due to increased wear and tear on their vehicles.

**Higher fuel costs** substantially added to the economic burden on families particularly when extremely limited public transport dictated that car ownership was an essential requisite for living in remote areas. Fuel prices in rural areas were considered by a number of respondents as a “*rural tax*” and called the Scottish Government to support a national standardisation of prices.

The women felt **public transport** was a very nominal provision and was provided to support the tourism market rather than the local community. It was a common complaint among participants that timetables were not there to support local commuting or for the needs of local inhabitants to access the amenities of larger towns like Inverness. The women would welcome changes to service provision that addressed community needs.

*“Buses are centred on ferry and train times. It is turnaround service there is no time for shopping or other pursuits. Non drivers have no access to anything.”*

### **Employment**

Increasing government incentives that would encourage more employment or business initiatives to thrive in the area was another key recommendation. The women were particularly keen that policy considerations address the dearth of **job opportunities available to women** in the Highlands, particularly in light of impending public service job cuts and the number part-time and seasonal jobs women depend on financially. They spoke of the high expectations in rural communities that women will perform unpaid volunteering or undertake low paid work that offers little in terms of financial security career development. It was widely proposed that a starting point must be to promote opportunity for young women to gain skills and experience in a wider pool of job sectors.

*“Issues of isolation and a strong patriarchal culture in the Highlands can flatten women’s confidence. Opportunities for employment and training are a means of overcoming the barriers faced by women here that are triggered by remoteness and macho traditions.”*

In addition the participants were clear that to ensure women are given realistic opportunity to gain skills, undertake training, develop businesses or seek employment **affordable local childcare** is essential.

*“Without this everything else for equalising employment opportunity for women is a pipe dream.”*

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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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