

Bellshill Roundtable Report



Thursday 9th February 2017

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Introduction

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) visited the Orbiston Business Centre in Bellshill on Thursday 9th February. We met with local women and discussed a variety of issues including employment; childcare and caring; training, development and education; welfare reform and the impact of Brexit on women and their communities.

The SWC would like to thank all of the women who attended.

Key Issues for Women

Brexit

Women were keen to discuss issues around Brexit - namely what it will mean for them and their communities and the impact this will have on day to day life.

"It's clear that we won't know how it will affect us until it's already happened. We don't know where we stand."

The UK joined the EU primarily to benefit from the free movement of trade and persons. The 'red tape' which has resulted, however, has taken away from those initial reasons for involvement. While there have undoubtedly been benefits to EU membership, some of the rules and bureaucracy which have been passed down are not seen to be positive for Scotland.

It is positive that the Scottish Government are involved in Brexit negotiation processes. There are, however, concerns as to the extent to which they are being listened to. The Scottish Government's position in Europe overall has also been questioned.

"We were told during the independence referendum that if we voted to stay within the UK we would be guaranteed EU membership. Things haven't turned out that way. Voting in one referendum hasn't meant anything for the next one, which has only caused more confusion."

Women feel that there was not enough information available prior to the referendum, which led many to make what they felt were *"uninformed decisions."*

"Nobody ever really said whether leaving would be a positive or a negative thing - it was all about politicians and sensational headlines. A lot of people would probably have made a different decision if they had more information."

Decisions were made by many on the back of what women perceived as *"scare tactics"* around services such as the NHS, as well as pensions and European funding for projects throughout the country. The lack of concrete information around these important issues is seen to have *"misled"* many voters.

The EU referendum was considered to be more *"bureaucratic"* than the Scottish independence referendum. The public were not as involved in discussions and debates around key issues, which is very much the opposite of what happened in 2014.

“Nobody ever brought it down to reality for the ordinary person in the street. Had they done so, we would have been more engaged.”

Concerns were raised around job losses as a result of the UK’s decision to leave the EU. There are many international companies in Scotland who employ large numbers. These workers are “*genuinely worried*” that their employers will choose to remove their operations and there will be significant job losses.

Concerns were expressed that the UK Government will scrap the Human Rights Act and replace it with a British Bill of Rights once Britain leaves the EU. The removal of additional protections from Europe could make this significantly more likely.

“There’s a real worry that we will lose our most basic human rights as a consequence of this decision.”

Conversely, discussions took place about the realistic enforcement of human rights at a grassroots level.

“My disabled daughter was subject to an assault at the school she attended, she was physically restrained for a significant period of time. As well as injury to herself, her human rights were undoubtedly breached. When I took her to the hospital, doctors commented that her injuries were unlike anything they had seen before. The police failed to properly investigate what happened and the school have not taken any responsibility. I have asked for the Local Authority to change their restraint policy so that this cannot happen to any other young person and have tried to use human rights law to do so. But because I cannot get civil legal aid I can’t pursue a claim - there’s no way I could afford to pay for it myself. So to me it doesn’t matter if the Human Rights Act is repealed - people’s human rights are not being protected as it is. It doesn’t matter where human rights protection will stop because it’s not even started for my daughter. What difference will leaving the EU genuinely make?”

Social Security

A number of aspects of welfare benefits and social security were raised. Changes to welfare benefits brought about by the UK Government over the last few years have had, and are continuing to have, an impact on women in the local area.

One of the most significant issues has arisen from changes to Housing Benefit (HB). Payments are now made directly to the claimant as opposed to the landlord. Powers over this will be devolved to Scotland, however until that happens HB will continue to go to the individual. This gives women, who are used to managing tight household budgets, more money than they are used to.

“It’s having a huge impact. Women have this extra money so are choosing to buy their kids new coats or shoes, or put extra money into their meters to heat their homes rather than pay their rent. Many are falling behind with their payments and are being made homeless as a result. They’re then re-housed, often in a different area. This creates upheaval for the family in general and has a specific affect on the children, who often have to move schools. The money needs to go back to the landlord. Things aren’t working as they are.”

It can be very difficult for families who own their homes to access Housing and Council Tax Benefit. There have been significant redundancies across the private sector over the last few years, as well as cuts to Local Authority budgets which has led to jobs being amalgamated and in some cases lost completely.

“More and more families are finding themselves in this position, where, for example, the dad has lost his job and the mum works part-time so they can’t live off her wages. When there’s not a lot of employment in the area, it’s very difficult to get another job to cover mortgage payments as well as cost of living. A lot of people in this situation don’t know if they’re entitled to assistance. Those who do have spoken about the difficulties they face. These families are at real risk of homelessness, but there doesn’t seem to be much available to help them.”

Another issue raised by women in Bellshill related to the Scottish Welfare Fund. It provides a safety net for vulnerable people on low incomes through the provision of Community Care Grants and Crisis Grants. The Scottish Welfare Fund is a national scheme, underpinned by law and delivered on behalf of the Scottish Government by all local councils. The fund is extremely important for those who rely on its support, however money is not always seen to be spent in the most effective way possible.

“I know of people who have been given white goods through the Welfare Fund. A few months later they’ve given their house up, sold the goods online and then applied to the Fund again when they’ve been re-housed. Similarly, any goods purchased through the Welfare Fund which are left in a property by tenants are put into storage for 28 days then destroyed. This uses up significant resources which could be spent more effectively elsewhere.”

This is all happening when important services, particularly at community level, are subject to reduction and in some cases removal through cuts to Local Authority budgets.

“Maybe we wouldn’t have to lose workers or projects because of funding constraints if the Council just got a bit smarter. They say they can’t give out second hand goods but surely if something has only been in a property for a few months, they could PAT test and security check it to give to someone else? That seems a lot more logical than the way they do things just now.”

Employment

For many women in the area, securing employment can be very difficult. Significant barriers exist, including the jobs available, cost of childcare and transport issues.

“It’s just not worth going out to work. By the time I was to secure a job, most likely in a part-time, low paid role, pay for childcare and for my transport to and from work, I’d be left with pennies. I don’t want to be claiming benefits, but until there’s a recognition that women struggle to get decent work for these reasons and more, I don’t see much other choice. I’m actually volunteering in a charity shop because I don’t want to sit about the house all day.”

Rising cost of living coupled with low wages means that those who are in work can find it difficult to make ends meet. Local foodbanks have reported significant use by families where either one or both parents are in employment.

“So many of the people who come in for help arrive in their working clothes. Their first priority is always to get food for their kids - women are quite open about the fact that they will go without food for days if it means their children can have at least one decent meal every day.”



Conclusions

The SWC would like to thank the women in Bellshill who took the time to talk about the issues which are important to them, their families and communities as a whole. It is essential that the voices of real women in Scotland continue to be heard at all levels of policy and decision making. Discussions such as this, as well as others being held by the SWC throughout Scotland, will ensure that this happens.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) is funded to engage with women throughout Scotland in order that their views might influence public policy.

This is achieved in a number of different ways - through roadshow, round table, conference and celebratory events. Following each event a report is compiled and issued to women who attend and relevant policy and decision makers.

The SWC uses the views of women to respond to Scottish and UK Government consultation papers.

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