

Ballater Roadshow Report

**Mental
Health**

Benefits

**Low
Paid**

Disability

**Living
Wage**

Sanctions

**Council
Tax**

Caring

**Equal
Pay**

Schools

**Welfare
Reform**

Thursday 28th July 2016

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Introduction

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) visited the Victoria and Albert Halls, Ballater, on Thursday 28th July 2016. We met with local women and discussed a variety of issues including employment; childcare and caring; training, development and education; welfare reform and health and social care.

The SWC would like to thank all of the women who attended, including Councillor Katrina Farquhar and Stuart Donaldson MP, who gave short presentations to women attending.

The information gathered on the day will be used to inform a number of SWC documents, including responses to consultations, calls for evidence and international reports.

Cuts to the public and voluntary sector have led to job losses, with many positions being reduced from full time to part time, job share, or removed completely. This is also the case for jobs at the lower end of the scale in the private sector, where women predominate. Austerity measures and reforms to welfare benefits have resulted in women struggling financially. There are also additional and increased burdens due to cuts in service provision.

As well as gaining women's experiences of balancing work and family life, the SWC was keen to hear their views on key priorities around health and social care in Scotland. Scotland has significant health inequalities. The value of access to healthcare which is free at the point of need should not be underestimated. The NHS is one of our most significant institutions. It is both a service provider and an employer, with women making up the majority of its workforce.

The 2016 Roadshow programme offers local women the opportunity to discuss these topics in more detail. It is important that they are given an opportunity to express how political decisions impact on them, their families and communities as a whole.



Councillor Katrina Farquhar

Councillor Katrina Farquhar provided an update on what Aberdeenshire Council are doing to support women in the local area. This included details of representation of women on the Council, Council services to support women and the Council as an employer. Councillor Farquhar also spoke about the partnership work being undertaken, particularly with the voluntary sector, around caring for older people in the community. This is important as the average age in the village has increased over the past few years.

Stuart Donaldson MP

Stuart Donaldson, the local MP for the area, provided an update on the work he has been undertaking at Westminster to support women. This included a question at Prime Minister's Questions around the UK Government's reluctance to ratify the Istanbul Convention. This is a Council of Europe Convention against violence against women and domestic violence.

Question One

Women have continued to bear the brunt of the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent budgetary decisions. Cuts to the public and voluntary sector have led to significant job losses, with many positions being reduced from full time to part time, job share, or removed completely. This is also the case for jobs at the lower end of the scale in the private sector, which are mostly undertaken by women. These issues, coupled with austerity measures and significant reforms to welfare benefits, have meant that many women are struggling financially. They are also experiencing additional/increased burdens due to cut backs in service provision.

Have these issues impacted at a local level on access to services, availability of education and employment opportunities? How have these changes affected local women and communities?

Voluntary Sector

Organisations such as the local Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB) are under real strain as a result of frequent changes to welfare benefits. Clients are accessing the service to seek help with responding to letters which *“are written in jargon – ordinary people struggle to understand what they mean.”* The CAB is working hard to cope with the sheer number of applications for appeals against, in the main, disability benefit payment decisions.

“It’s gotten to the stage where the staff are having to refuse to help people because they simply do not have the capacity to do so. They’re working 18 hour days but still can’t manage to get through everything. This pressure is taking its toll on the mental and physical health of staff, many of whom are women.”

The lack of certainty around funding for this type of organisation is also having an impact, both on staff and on service users. The local CAB provides an outreach service. Those who benefit from and often rely on this are concerned that it will be cut.

Employment

“There’s nothing to keep young people here. Those who go on to college or university very rarely come back. Those for whom that isn’t an option can really struggle to get a job locally.”

More desirable jobs are located in Aberdeen, however they can be difficult to access due to limited public transport. Jobs which are available in and around Ballater tend to be in the tourist industry and are often low paid and low skilled. The proximity to The Lecht ski resort and Balmoral Castle mean that, unlike in other areas, the tourist industry is year-round. The devastating floods in 2015 have, however, had a significant impact on tourism.

The proximity to the oil industry means that many men who work in Aberdeen choose to move to their families to Ballater. This can be very isolating for their partners, especially if they are unable to work. The area used to be affluent because of the money that came from oil, but this is changing as jobs are being lost.

Many women are forced to undertake more than one job because of the lack of employment opportunities. The prevalence of zero hours contracts means there is little job security. Accessing any kind of employment can be particularly difficult for women with caring responsibilities.

Childcare

The complete lack of formal childcare in Ballater has led many women to leaving the area in order to be able to find employment and nursery provision. Others have had no choice but to give up their jobs in order to look after their children. When they eventually attempt to re-enter the labour market, they are faced with a number of barriers.

“Even though being a full time parent is a job which brings with it a range of skills and abilities, because it’s not something that you can get paid for it’s not valued. It’s so difficult to get back into training or work because of the limited opportunities in the area.”

Women have attempted to establish formal childcare in the area. They have faced significant barriers in doing so, such as strict health and safety regulations for their homes. The amount of work they have to do in order to become registered is off-putting for many.

“Of course proper procedures must be followed, especially when it comes to health and safety for children. It seems, however, that the system is set up to discourage anyone from becoming a childminder rather than helping them to do so.”

There is a real reliance on informal childcare. This places pressure on older relatives, who may still be working or have other caring responsibilities within the family. The lack of provision also means that many children are missing out on their entitlement to 600 hours per year of early learning and childcare from the Scottish Government.

Public Transport

The bus service in the area is very expensive. Journeys to Aberdeen, the closest city, can take a long time. Frequent stops are made in smaller towns and villages, which can make using the bus difficult for women who need to get to work. Stagecoach is the main provider in the area. As it is a business, if a route is not considered to be profitable then it will be withdrawn.

“Sometimes buses which we’ve relied on for years just stop because they’re not making the company any money. Services aren’t designed with the people who actually rely on them in mind – it’s all about tourists and making money.”

Public transport is also heavily relied upon due to the cost of driving lessons. It can cost up to £85 for two hours, which is out of the reach of many. As it is such an important part of living in and around Ballater, women need to be able to access a safe, affordable and reliable system of transport.

Education

Each village in Aberdeenshire has its own primary school. There are approximately 80 children in Ballater school at the moment, however in previous years that number was higher. The ageing population of the village, coupled with few employment opportunities, can be attributed to the decline in the school roll.

“The future of the primary school is under threat. There has to be enough children attending to keep it open, but how do we encourage families to move here and bring their kids up if there’s nothing to really attract them?”

Young people have to travel to attend secondary school. The local high school does not, however, provide a very wide range of subjects. Many students have to travel between schools, which can be as much as one hour each way, in order to be able to study the subjects they want to.



Question Two

Scotland has significant health inequalities and the value of access to healthcare should not be underestimated. Provision is free at the point of need and a broad range of services, support and treatments are offered. The NHS is one of our most significant institutions. It is both a service provider and an employer, with women making up the majority of its workforce. The Scottish Government’s recent conversation ‘*Creating a Healthier Scotland*’ provides the opportunity for individuals and communities to influence the way health and social care is provided.

What are your key priorities around health and social care in Scotland?

Hospitals

The closest hospital to Ballater is in Aboyne, which is approximately twelve miles away. This cottage hospital offers certain services and facilities, however many patients must travel to Aberdeen for appointments. This is the case for maternity services, which previously were available locally.

“Women have to go to Aberdeen to deliver their babies, which can be stressful. It takes an hour to get there. If the family doesn’t have a car, they have to rely on assistance from friends or family where possible.”

Many women in the area have taken to having home births in order to avoid travelling that distance.

Carers

There has been a noticeable difference in services which assist and support carers and the people they look after over the last few years. There are no nursing homes in the village. This means that those who require that level of care must leave the home and community in which they may have lived all of their lives.

“The last thing that these folk need is to move far away from the place they’ve always lived. It’s very sad, both for them and for the people they are leaving behind.”

It is extremely difficult to get people to take up formal home caring jobs in the area. While these positions are advertised, they are low paid and offer little in the way of flexibility of hours. The majority of those who do work in this field are women, who are not adequately valued for the important role they carry out.

Those who work as carers are expected to travel significant distances in order to look after the people who rely on their support and assistance. Much of their work is done rurally, which often means driving down dark farm roads in difficult weather.

“It’s really dangerous, especially in winter when the snow comes. There’s not always a phone signal so we could be left completely stranded. We’re also expected to use our own cars. I don’t particularly like having to drive on roads full of holes and stones in my own vehicle.”

Carers also work to extremely tight timescales. They are expected to get their patients out to bed, wash them and give them breakfast in a period of approximately twenty minutes. This is detrimental to both the carer and the person they look after.

“It’s so hard. For some patients, we’re the only person they will see all day. They’re on their own and they’re lonely. It’s horrible having to explain that we can hardly spend any time with them because we’ve got so many others to see. That’s not why I do this job.”

Women who provide informal, unpaid care are seriously undervalued, both financially and by society. They need more support to carry out these vital roles.

“Many don’t know much about the illnesses they’re caring for. These women have had to give up their careers, lifestyles and social lives. They have little to no respite, their physical and mental health suffers and they often feel very guilty about the situation they are in.”

Mental Health Provision

There are not enough mental health services in the area. Local GP’s do not have a lot of information about these issues. As a result, patients and their families *“have to fight for access to services.”* Voluntary sector organisations are often relied upon to provide advice and assistance, but demand locally means that staff have to work more and more hours, often with cuts to their funding.

The lack of available support forces those with mental health issues, or their families and support networks, to go looking for assistance. This can add additional stress and in some cases make the person feel worse.

“Mental health isn’t spoken about within this community, so it’s even harder for people who need a bit of support and assistance to access any. There’s still a horrible stigma attached. We need to work to break that down. Mental and physical health should be given the same level of attention.”



Question Three

What one thing could improve your local area?

- Increased awareness of mental health issues and more support available for those who need it.
- More money put into health and transport locally.
- The provision of accessible, affordable, flexible childcare, as well as support for mothers who seek to return to work.
- Less centralisation of services - keep some things in the local area as they are valued and used.
- More activities and social opportunities for older women.
- Ensure that local post offices are not closed as they are a vital part of the community.
- Improved public transport - older people have free bus passes but because there are so few services, they can't use them.



Additional Question

How do you feel about the result of the EU Referendum? What impact, if any, do you think this will have on women in Scotland, their families and communities as a whole?

The SWC gathered women's opinions on the result of the EU Referendum.

- "Scottish communities benefit financially from EU membership. Funding allows them to make choices about what works best for them. Communities are very strong entities but require access to funding, information and shared experiences. All of this can be found within the framework of the EU."
- "I'm very sorry that the decision was made to leave. The economy was on the up. What happens now?"
- "I'm worried about the impact of this decision on areas that people may not think about. What happens to women in science who receive EU funding for international research? Also the Erasmus Educational Exchange for Students. There's a real fear of the unknown."



Impact of 2015 Flooding

While in Ballater, the SWC team viewed the devastation which the December 2015 flood caused. Speaking with locals, here are a few of their stories.

- “It’s heartbreaking. It’ll take us another 6 months to recover. “
- “When the water came, it was so quick. In 3 minutes, we had 9 feet of water and nowhere to go.”
- “The death rate in the village has increased over the past 6 months. No one died in the floods. But older people, who lost all their possessions and didn’t know where to start, just gave up. They lost everything – all their furniture, photographs and memories. The young people are quite happy to get the insurance money and start again, but the older people just want their belongings.”
- “We have a couple in their 80s staying in the hotel. They’ve been here since the New Year. They don’t know when they’ll get back into their own home. They’re pretty upbeat but sometimes they just want to get home.”
- “We’ve had families staying with us for a few months, but then the tourist season kicked in. We had bookings to fulfil and they had to move on. Some families have moved 5 or 6 times over the past few months, just taking accommodation where there are spaces.”
- “The Church stayed open 24/7 for 6 weeks at the beginning of the year. It provided food and shelter for those with nothing. It was the mainstay of the village.”
- “Some of the oldest shops in the village were destroyed. The owners do not have money to restore these well loved places that were a valuable part of the community.”
- “Many people come home from work and then help rebuild the community, so that the village will function again.”
- “The caravan park was a focal point during the summer. All 71 of the static caravans were devastated during the floods. We have managed to recreate spaces for touring caravans but it will take months to have the other part of the park up and running. The touring caravan area is lovely and we have managed to fence off the damaged area so that visitors do not have to look at it. But this is having an impact on the local economy. This is a tourist area and we are missing hundreds of families over the summer period. It is also having an effect on employment in the area as women worked on the site as cleaners.”
- “The economy has been hit hard. Visitors are still coming to the village. But with shops, cafes and restaurants still closed, there is nothing for them to stay here for.”

Impact of 2015 Flooding - Images



One of the houses which has been refurbished.



Impact of flooding near to the caravan park.



One of the houses which is still condemned.



The floor inside what was the Co-op, the only supermarket in the village.



Impact of flooding near to what was the entrance to the caravan park.



The wall at the fire station, which was brought down by the force of the water.