



Scottish Government Consultation on Devolved Powers over Employability Service in Scotland

October 2015

The Scottish Women's Convention

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.

Introduction

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) has been consulting with women on social security and employability services at length over the last few years. The organisation has seen how changes introduced by the then UK Coalition Government through the Welfare Reform Act 2012 have had an impact on women, their families and communities as a whole. As far back as 2012 women have raised concerns at the SWC's annual roadshow events, which are held throughout the country, around issues including, but not limited to:

- Accessing, sustaining and progressing in employment;
- Working hours thresholds for tax credits;
- Online applications;
- Lack of assistance with application process;
- Support for the long term unemployed;
- Lone parents;
- Access to childcare;
- Carers; and
- The type of employment available for women.

As well as this information, the SWC has consulted on the questions asked by the Scottish Government in this questionnaire. An online survey, undertaken to gather initial responses from women to the key questions, generated positive results. An event, which looked at both employability and social security, was held in Glasgow on 5th September. The SWC's response to this questionnaire is, therefore, informed from the experiences of women since changes first began to affect their lives, as well as more recent information about the future delivery of social security in Scotland.

Question 1

The Scottish Government has outlined its overall aims for employment support in Scotland. The service will:

- Meet the needs of unemployed people as well as employers;
- Meet the needs of those with specific barriers (e.g. disabled people, older workers, people with caring responsibilities);
- Build on existing employment support services in Scotland; and
- Help deliver sustainable employment and economic growth.

The Work Programme and Work Choice are the UK Government's mechanisms for supporting those seeking work. They should provide guidance in looking for a job, completing an application form and support in interview techniques.

What is your experience of current support available for unemployed women? What support is (was) available to help you find work? What resources and assistance do women need when looking for work?

Applications and Interviews

More needs to be done to assist women during the initial stages of seeking employment. One of the key issues faced is a lack of knowledge as to where to physically look for work.

"I was made redundant and decided to go to the Jobcentre who were extremely vague, telling me to 'look around online for a job'. I left feeling more confused than when I went in. There should be a centralised database of vacancies rather than having to trawl through agency sites, council sites etc."

Many women do not have experience of using IT equipment on a regular basis, let alone preparing a CV, completing application forms or attending interviews. This can result from having been made redundant from a job they have been in for a number of years, or because they have spent a significant amount of time away from the labour market. This is often due to caring responsibilities, particularly for children. The current system does not give consideration to those who do not have the relevant computer skills or knowledge. Very little is provided in the way of career's guidance. As a result, women can find themselves applying for unsuitable jobs, or not securing the type of employment they are able to do because they are not adequately prepared for an interview.

"An interview is an extremely daunting thing if you've never had to do one before. A bit of help beforehand can really make all the difference."

Women are often unaware of the skills they possess when seeking work. This is particularly the case for those who have been away from the labour market for some time.

"Too many say 'I'm just a mum', not realising the wide variety of skills they possess as a result of running a home and raising children."

Practical Suggestions for Change:

- Provide funding for support regarding interview skills and completing application forms. This could be done through mentoring, or through third sector agencies, which often have a more in-depth knowledge of the people they work with.
- More opportunities for interaction with employers, allowing potential employees to visit workplaces and speak to people who have jobs there.
- Ensure childcare is made available for women who are attending interviews.

BME Women

The qualifications of women who are coming to the UK are not always recognised. This is understandable as the training received may not meet the criteria of the UK. There are however often significant time and costs associated for those who wish to obtain the relevant qualifications in order to work in the UK. As a result, some highly qualified doctors are working in unskilled menial jobs because they are unable to meet the costs of study, while supporting children and the rest of the family.

“I’m a dentist who came to Scotland as a professional, fully qualified woman. When I came here I went to the Jobcentre to see what was available. I was directed towards roles such as cleaning/catering/customer service, all of which I am over-qualified to do. I undertook a job in home care and was given a contract however the terms were not set out. I was expected to be available in Livingston between 7am and 7pm at all times. I live about twenty minutes away and have caring responsibilities. It became quite stressful trying to maintain this job.”

A lack of understanding by Jobcentre staff means that highly skilled BME women can be pushed towards low paid, low skilled jobs.

Some BME women who are not fluent English speakers have encountered difficulties with Jobcentre staff, who are often unable to understand their needs. This can cause benefit claim forms to be incorrectly filled in, which results in delays to payment of benefits. Women for whom English is not their first language are able to attend classes to learn the language on a basic level, however if women do not have a job and are then not able to mix with other English speakers, their language skills do not improve.

Practical Suggestions for Change:

- Government funding should be provided for interpreters to assist non English speakers.
- More investment in training for Jobcentre staff in to enable them to understand the often unique issues faced by the BME community.
- Single rooms made available during benefits interviews to allow people privacy when discussing their case. It can be daunting for women from a BME background to discuss personal issues in an open environment.

- Any changes to the Benefit System should be publicised more widely within the BME community. This could be done by leaflets or posters in a variety of different languages.
- The Scottish Government should provide access to free English courses in colleges, ranging from basic to fluent English lessons.

Childcare and Kinship Care

“If employment is the route out of poverty, then childcare is the bridge.”

One of the most significant barriers for women who want to get into work is the lack of accessible, affordable, appropriate childcare in Scotland. In order to make work pay, many women have to secure enough hours to be able to qualify for assistance with childcare costs through tax credits. If an employer is either unwilling or unable to do this, they often have no choice but to refuse a job or end up leaving their employment.

“Being offered a job with hours below the tax credit thresholds is just a no-go. Private childcare is so expensive - it’s impossible to be able to pay for it without additional help from tax credits. A lot of the work on offer is also through a zero hours contract. If I were to take a job like that, I would be in a much worse financial situation than I am just now.”

In the past, childcare was often available in the vicinity of women’s work e.g. near to hospitals for women who worked in the NHS. This approach was much more practical and meant that women were able to drop their children off without having to go out of their way. Nowadays, however, women often have to put a child into childcare which is far from their place of work. If their child is ill, women then have to travel back to where their childcare is, which can be time consuming if relying on public transport. Employers are not always accommodating to this type of situation depending on where the woman works. This is especially the case for those on zero hours contracts.

“We need childcare to be available near to where women work – it also needs to be a lot cheaper than it is at the moment.”

Many low income families are forced to rely on private childcare, paid for through assistance with tax credits, due to a lack of public provision or flexibility around public services in their area. This can be a reason for facilities to increase costs, particularly private providers, which means that women still have a shortfall to make up. They can end up worse off, with less money at the end of the month. Lone parents have double the responsibilities and double the burden, which is not always recognised.

Grandparents and other older women in families are taking on significantly more caring responsibilities in order to help, for example, children and nephews and nieces with childcare.

“It’s much easier when women have flexibility with work so as not to have to rely on family and friends, particularly in school holidays. Older women are struggling to cope as they often have to look after elderly parents and juggle work.”

Unpaid carers, the majority of whom are women, also require additional support to be able to seek and sustain employment. Restrictions on working hours as a result of claiming Carers Allowance can seriously restrict their earning potential.

“I can only earn about £110 per week in order to keep my Carer’s Allowance. Good luck trying to find a job which pays that and provides the flexibility I need to carry out my caring responsibilities.”

Practical Suggestions for Change:

- Employment support systems must take all aspects of women’s caring responsibilities into account.
- Prospective employers should ensure flexibility for employees so that they are able to work round their childcare or kinship caring requirements.
- Any new system needs to value women’s caring responsibilities and roles and understand that they are not always able to seek work. The provision of Carers Benefits should reflect that and ensure women are fairly rewarded for the unpaid work they undertake.
- Funding should be provided for women who have to pay expensive upfront childcare costs, with a system in place which allows them to repay the money in a way which does not lead to financial hardship.
- More understanding of the additional barriers faced by women who have disabled children or children with additional support needs is necessary.

Disabled Women

At present, there is little support available for disabled women who want to access sustainable employment.

“I went to the Jobcentre to seek work knowing I would need help with a disability. I was told that there would be external organisations which could help, however in reality very little support was provided. I was given a job in retail which involved lifting, despite telling my disability employment adviser that I would struggle due to my condition. I was basically given no choice but to take the job, which I ended up having to give up. Nobody is really listening to disabled people.”

Disabled people need a firm diagnosis before they can access certain benefits and assistance. This can be difficult, particularly for those with mental health issues, whose conditions can change on a daily basis.

Practical Suggestions for Change:

- Services for disabled women must be needs led, recognising how conditions

- and illnesses can impact on their ability both to seek and remain in work.
- Health assessments should not be carried out by individuals who have medical training. Where an illness relates to mental health, specialists should be consulted.
 - *“We need to keep employability services within the community. Voluntary organisations are more than capable, they know the people they deal with and would be able to listen. That’s where the funding should go.”*

Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Jobcentre

“The Work Programme isn’t working. Women are being forced into training programmes which don’t meet their skills and abilities, which as a result are not effective. There seems to be a focus on meeting targets rather than how these schemes can help women into work.”

Jobcentre workers are now referred to as ‘job coaches’, however the change in title does not mean that they are being adequately trained to meet the needs of claimants. For many, attending Jobcentre Plus feels like it’s more about meeting targets rather than supporting individuals.

The current Individual Placement and Support (IPS) model, which is an evidence-based approach to supported employment for people who have severe mental health issues, is seen to work reasonably well. There is, however, not enough information out there for people about it, nor are there enough places offered.

“You cannot underestimate the importance of personalised support from the people who are supposed to help you find work. The way things are at the moment, people often feel like they are simply an inconvenience to staff.”

Jobcentre staff need to be aware that many people who go to seek work have never accessed the benefits system before, due to them having been in employment for a number of years.

“I was self-employed for a number of years. However, due to a big change in my circumstances, I now have to sign on while I look for work. This has been a real challenge for me. Jobcentre and DWP staff do not offer any sympathy or grant leniency towards women who are dealing with the psychological impact of having to cope with housing, feeding and raising children on their own with no support from family members. There’s not enough training to deal with women on a case by case, individual basis.”

There is also a lack of information for women who have recently been made redundant. Cuts to public services and vast redundancies in the private sector, both in areas where women make up a large proportion of the workforce, have led to a significant number of women having to seek work again.

Individual needs and skills are not taken into account in employability services. Support is not directed in the way it should be, meaning that many women are not

provided with enough information about access to work.

This results in the Jobcentre sending people for interviews in jobs they do not have the skills or abilities for.

Practical Suggestions for Change:

- As the functions of the DWP and Jobcentre Plus will remain reserved to Westminster, it is vital that the Scottish Government ensures strong dialogue with both agencies while new employability services are implemented.
- The Scottish Government should design a system of training, in partnership with Westminster, for DWP/Jobcentre Plus staff around referrals to employability services. This will ensure that the aims of a Scottish approach to employability, which is more person centred and focuses on issues such as equality and dignity, are taken into account when claimants are being referred.
- Jobcentre Plus workers should take into account women's skills and abilities when making referrals to employability services.

Older Women

Many older women have qualifications, however they have not had the opportunity to use them to their full potential because of caring responsibilities, raising their families etc.

Case Study

"When my husband died I wanted to get back to work. I had raised five children, all of whom had left home, and I wanted to be able to go out, meet people and do a job that I enjoyed. I went to the Jobcentre because I wanted to work, but I had to apply for jobs which were not appropriate to me. I felt this was a waste of my potential because my circumstances were not taken into account. Eventually, I was guided towards a job in the care sector and was put on a zero hours contract. To be honest, I felt that I was past the age of working under those kinds of conditions, but I took the job anyway. I needed to work - I was not entitled to benefits because I had a widow's pension and I was just over the threshold to be able to claim anything.

The job I do - caring for people in their homes - and the conditions I work under, mean that I am only able to provide substandard levels of care to vulnerable older people. I have to hurry them with whatever they're doing because I only have a short time with one person until I have to go onto the next. That means I have to do a lot of driving about to get to the people's houses. I don't get paid to travel to my first client of the day, nor do I get paid for the upkeep of my car, despite the fact I have to use it for work. The amount of work I have to do, coupled with the fact there was no guarantee of hours on a week by week basis, had a real impact on my mental health. The stress I'm under almost makes it not worthwhile working."

Practical Suggestions for Change:

- Ensure that new employability services are designed to take into account women's lived experiences, valuing the work undertaken by older women, both in employment and in the unpaid work they do.

Zero Hours Contracts

Zero hours contracts come under significant criticism from women. Many of the jobs which employability services and the Jobcentre send claimants to apply for are often governed by this type of contract, offering low pay, few opportunities for training and development and overall insecure employment.

“Workers on zero hours contracts are fodder for making profit for big companies rather than being treated as human beings. There’s no humanity with this type of work at all. The insecurity and exploitation makes it very difficult to access childcare, and means too many women are actually worse off because they don’t work enough hours to qualify for top-up benefits through tax credits.”

Practical Suggestions for Change:

- Ensure that employers who take on workers through employability services offer proper employment contracts, applying a fine to those who provide zero hours contracts.

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In your experience, is this support currently available?

For most women, support when seeking work is either very limited, or not available at all within their local area. While assistance is available in theory, there are often a number of barriers for women which prevent them from being able to physically take advantage of support.

For example, basic support from the Jobcentre is provided. However because staff are under so much pressure to deal with so many claimants, with varying skills, levels and competencies, it is extremely difficult to access the individual support that many require. There are also issues for women who have been made redundant and attend the Jobcentre in order to find a new job.

“While there is help available around applications and interview processes, it is at a very basic level. I have good computer skills and a good standard of education. I have, as a result, been turned away from attending courses as my CV as it stands is considered to be ‘good enough’. I don’t know where to go from here.”

Support provided by services within the voluntary sector is seen as “*invaluable*”, however can be withdrawn with very little notice due to precarious funding arrangements.

“With a lot of things, it’s a case of support being available until the money runs out.”

Similarly, where childcare does exist, funded places in Local Authority nurseries are very difficult to obtain and are generally only provided on the basis of sessions in the morning or the afternoon. This leads to a reliance on expensive private childcare, which is out of the financial reach of many families.

“Finding childcare is such a struggle. It means endlessly searching websites and the phone book, then making the necessary calls to see if there is availability in the local area. That then leads to trying to work out how to gather the necessary deposit. Most places look for one month upfront – how are you supposed to get that when you’re relying on benefits?”

Difficulty in accessing formal childcare provision, particularly in rural areas where there is very little availability, leads to a reliance on informal care from friends and family. More often than not, this falls upon other women, many of whom are already looking after other family members while maintaining employment. The strain can take a toll on their physical and mental health.

“I feel like I rely on my family, particularly my mum, too much and I feel bad about that. But there’s nothing I can do. If they didn’t look after my children then I can’t look for work, and if I can’t look for work then I’ll get sanctioned. If it wasn’t for them I would be in a really difficult financial situation – I’m lucky though, not everyone has a support network round about them.”

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Question 2

How can the current system be changed (if needed) to support those seeking work?

There is a feeling amongst women that many aspects of the current system should be reconsidered, taking into account the needs of individuals, as well as maintaining levels of dignity and respect.

“People need encouragement and to be treated as individuals, not numbers to be processed. Ideally the Jobcentre should find work and arrange interviews for people according to their skills and abilities, which is not the way it works at the moment. Where work placements are found, people should be paid a decent wage and work to decent terms and conditions.”

Any new employability service needs to be aware that entering the labour market after a long time away, or for the first time, can be extremely daunting. The level of support will depend solely on the needs of the individual. Assumptions cannot be made about what they need or do not need based on complex, inflexible forms and assessments.

“What is the point in making people apply for jobs they are not qualified to do or are unable to undertake because of e.g. caring responsibilities, just to be able to show that they have completed a specific number of applications in a week?”

As sanctions and conditionality are to remain reserved, serious tensions could arise between policies put in place by the Scottish Government with regards to the Work Programme, and the sanctions that can be imposed by the Jobcentre Plus, a UK-level institution. This could be particularly problematic given the findings of the Scottish Parliament Welfare Reform Committee in its report on sanctions. It seems somewhat at odds that on one hand, the Scottish Government can create a Work Programme which best suits the needs of Scottish people, yet on the other hand the sanctions associated with that remain with Westminster. Those seeking work could be at a detriment as a result. It is, therefore, vital that the Scottish Government works as closely as possible with the DWP and other relevant UK Government departments. Measures must not be undermined by the DWP handling of those who are unable to comply with benefit requirements.

It is also extremely important that any jobs undertaken via the Work Programme or Work Choice are sustainable and long-term. There is little point in investing in training and support for individuals for a role which is only going to last for a short period of time.

“There is nothing more demoralising than being given the skills and confidence to do a job which only lasts for twelve weeks. Not to mention the stress brought on by trying to arrange childcare for such a short period of time. It seems to be more hassle than it’s worth in the end.”



Question 3

Are there particular groups who require additional support when looking for work?

Women in general require additional support when looking for work. Barriers exist particularly for lone parents, disabled women and those with long term health conditions, women returning to work after having children, those with mental health issues and women who have lived chaotic lifestyles. In particular, the following groups would benefit from specific assistance for a number of reasons.

Older Women

At present, the focus on getting young people into work has meant many older women are missing out on employment opportunities.

“Those of us who are still able to work seem to be neither old nor young. We’re nowhere.”

These women have often worked in low paid, part-time jobs, in order to fit in with how they are going to live once they retire. This is also the case with older women who have lost their spouse. They have to live on a small widow’s pension which can make it difficult to claim other benefits. These women want to work and contribute, however are unable to because of the types of employment available.

“Start valuing our skills and life experiences - these can make a huge difference to many workplaces.”

Long Term Unemployed

As well as physical assistance to find a job, emotional support should be provided to women who are either returning to the labour market or entering it for the first time. More needs to be done to ensure they are able to stay in employment.

“There’s not a lot of help out there for women who have been off for a long time with certain illnesses, such as post natal depression. More needs to be done to support them and encourage them into decent work.”

BME Women

BME women face a number of additional barriers to accessing work. More needs to be done to ensure that frontline staff are made aware of issues around language and culture in order to be able to assist these women as much as possible.

“Staff can come across as rude or ignorant. A bit more training and awareness of why BME women can struggle with long complicated forms would be really beneficial. The way in which women are being spoken to because they don’t fully understand everything is not acceptable.”

Carers

Unpaid carers, the majority of whom are women, can struggle to get into work. This is often due to their caring responsibilities, as well as the potential loss of Carer’s Allowance if they work over the allowed earnings threshold for qualification. The Scottish Government has a real opportunity to make a difference to the lives of carers. There needs to be communication and coherence between employability services which assist these women into work and Carers Allowance as power over this aspect of social security is devolved to Scotland.

“Carers are never ‘just carers’ – they have qualifications, skills and abilities which need to be recognised. Many would like to be able to get into part-time employment, however at present there are too many restrictions. It is also important to take into account the fact that women who undertake caring responsibilities will not necessarily always do so. They need to be able to access training and support to maintain and develop their skills so as to prepare for a return to employment when their caring role ends.”

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Question 4

What extra assistance do they need?

Childcare

Accessible, affordable, appropriate childcare is one of the key aspects of assistance which will allow more women to be able to get into work. In designing new employability programme the Scottish Government must recognise that unless women have access to childcare, they will be unable to participate. This includes provision when attending interviews and appointments at the Jobcentre, as well as all aspects of the Work Programme. Where there is no formal childcare available, for example in rural areas, this must be taken into account and women must not be punished for non-attendance or non-compliance with requirements.

“Childcare is such a big thing which is too often forgotten about by policy makers. The costs are prohibitive when you’re used to receiving the bare minimum in benefits and have to pay large fees in advance. Both the Scottish Government and employers need to realise that women don’t stop being the people they were before they made the decision to have a family and instead that can actually enhance their skills in many ways. Stop offering support on such a basic level and take childcare needs into account.”

Applications and Interviews

A number of areas of support around application and interview processes must be considered in order for women to be able to fully participate in employability services.

Applications must be completed online. Very little assistance is provided to those who do not have access to, or the skills to use, a computer or the internet.

“Pressure is on women to find a job, however they often do not have the IT skills required to navigate the Universal Job Match (UJM) site or even access to the internet to register and upload CVs to job websites. More time and money needs to be invested, otherwise these women will never be able to enter the labour market.”

Women who have not been in employment for a long time, or who have been made redundant from a job they have been in for a long time, may require help with confidence building. This “*softer support*” is as important as physical assistance such as childcare and decent public transport. These services are often provided by organisations within the voluntary sector, which can be subject to cuts to funding. It is vital that this type of support is built into employability services and that resources are available for services to be able to provide it.



CONCLUSION

Overall, the Scottish Women’s Convention believes the devolution of powers over employability services could have a positive impact on the lives of women and their families in Scotland. It is our view that the following issues should be given key consideration when processes and systems are designed to accommodate these powers:

- Support with application and interview processes;
- IT skills;
- Availability of broadband, particularly in rural areas;
- Unique issues and barriers faced by BME women, older women and disabled women;
- Provision of accessible, affordable and appropriate childcare;
- Support for unpaid carers;
- Working relationship between the Scottish Parliament/Scottish Government and the DWP/UK Parliament;
- Provision of support versus availability; and
- Any potential conflict with powers reserved to Westminster.

The SWC has produced a number of reports around the impact of Welfare Reform on women. Visit www.scottishwomensconvention.org to find out more.

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