

Scottish Women's Convention

Falkirk Roadshow

Thursday 21st May 2015

Flexibility Family Modern Apprenticeships
Sanctions **Childcare**
Maternity **Low Paid** **Employment**
Falkirk Disability
Affordable
Low Skilled **Roadshow** Progression
Living Wage Benefits Mental Health
Training Schools Barriers
Development **Welfare Reform**
Caring Council Tax **Community**

Health and Social Care
Zero Hours Contracts

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) visited Callendar House, Falkirk on Thursday 21st May 2015. We met with local women and discussed a variety of issues including employment; childcare and caring; training, development and education; welfare reform and changes to the way in which council tax is charged.

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

www.scottishwomensconvention.org

Introduction

Women face barriers in sustaining and progressing in the labour market. There are also difficulties in accessing further learning and education, training and development. With increased pressures from family responsibilities, women often struggle to organise themselves on a daily basis. This is all taking place against a backdrop of cuts to public services and changes to the welfare benefits system.

As well as gaining women's experiences of balancing work and family life, the SWC was keen to hear their views on proposals by the Commission on Local Tax Reform (<http://localtaxcommission.scot/>). This Commission has been established to identify and examine alternatives that would deliver a fair system of local taxation to support the funding of services delivered by Local Government.

The 2015 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.



QUESTION ONE

As of December 2014, women's employment in Scotland was at an all-time high; however women are still on zero hours contracts, in low-paid, part-time, precarious employment. Women also have to juggle commitments at home and at work.

What are your experiences of home and family life?

CHILDCARE

One of the key issues for women in the area is the lack of accessible, affordable and appropriate childcare. This is one of the biggest barriers for women wishing to enter, sustain and progress in employment.

"It's just such a big issue. There's very little provision available for children under three and a real lack of flexibility at pre-school level, particularly with Council-run childcare. The reliance on private nurseries is costing women just as much as they are earning."

The way in which childcare is provided, through a mixture of public and private nurseries and childminders, as well as the lack of joined-up provision is limiting too many women's choices.

“Nursery doesn't suit all children. The way things stand, however, women feel in many circumstances that they have to go back to work rather than stay at home. They are forced to access childcare when it's not really what the parent or the child wants. Staying at home to bring up children is not recognised the way it should be.”

The inflexibility of childcare limits the choices of women in further education.

“I work in a Council-run day nursery beside the college. Most of the mums are studying subjects such as hair and beauty or care - traditionally female roles. It seems that the jobs they can get as a result are the easiest to have while juggling childcare responsibilities.”

The jobs that many women undertake, such as work in hotels, restaurants, call centres and care homes, are outwith school hours. Shifts are often in the evenings and at weekends and there is hardly any childcare provision for this type of work. Lone parents can find it especially difficult, as they do not have a partner they can rely on to look after their children while they go to work. Women are forced to rely on family and friends to help, which can place a strain on relationships.

“I feel like I rely on my family too much sometimes and I feel bad about that. But there's nothing I can do. If they didn't look after my children then I wouldn't be able to work.”

Women also identified a difference between babysitting and childcare, which again can have an impact on lone parents.

“My mum looks after my children outwith their 16 hours of funded nursery provision per week and I'm so grateful to her for that. It means that I don't do much at the weekends though, like go to the gym or meet with friends. I don't want to have to ask her to babysit for me when she's been providing my childcare during the week. It's not fair.”

Many women have moved away from the areas they grew up in and where their family continue to live. They do not have a support network, which can force them to rely more on childcare than others. The ageing population, coupled with the continually increasing retirement age, means many grandparents are still working and as a result are unable to help with childcare.

Childcare workers, the majority of whom are women, often have children themselves and it can be very difficult for them to access childcare. This is particularly the case if their child is not placed in the nursery where they work. Shifts for childcare workers can start as early as 7.00am and finish as late as 6.00pm, so they also have to rely on friends and family.

“It always seems to be women relying on other women.”

EMPLOYMENT

While there are employment opportunities in the area, many are centred on low paid, low skilled, part-time jobs. Only being able to find this type of work can be detrimental to women's confidence. There is not a lot of support for those who wish to progress.

"How many women can give up one or two part-time jobs (which suit their family circumstances) to go to university to get a teaching degree or an accountancy degree?"

A lot of women are underemployed, whereby they have one or more part-time job instead of one full-time job, or they are carrying out work which they are over-qualified for. This can be for a number of reasons. The main causes of this type of work include lack of flexibility in full-time employment, part-time work not being valued, and a lack of job opportunities overall.

"Having a degree doesn't guarantee a job. I'm a team leader in a shop and I'm being made redundant. I have a degree in maths but I can't get a job."

Women who work or have worked in senior roles find themselves extremely disadvantaged when they choose to have a family. Those returning from maternity leave can face barriers when trying to return to the job they held before they had a baby.

"I was made redundant whilst on maternity leave. I was told that due to business needs, when I returned to work I would have to travel to an office 40 miles from my home and be there for 6.30am. When I said I couldn't do this, I was offered reduced hours. This was also unsuitable, so I was made redundant."

The lack of flexibility on the part of some employers is one of the contributing factors.

"I was previously a senior manager. When I had my children I wanted to be able to keep my job but adapt my working hours so I could be at home more. This wasn't an option. I now do part-time work in the evenings and at weekends because this fits better round my family responsibilities."

There is a lack of knowledge around the right to request flexible working. Employees are often unaware that they can ask to work on a more flexible basis. Women feel they have to have a level of confidence and strength to be able to make such a request. Many also believe they are not entitled to ask if they work in a certain job or, for example, if they work part-time.

The precarious nature of employment in the third sector, which employs a large number of women, is also an issue.

"You're always as little as a year away from losing your job because of funding. It's hard to work with this as a constant possibility."

The way in which organisations are funded, i.e. between one and three years, means that workers are *“basically on a permanent temporary contract.”* This makes it difficult to plan ahead, particularly in terms of securing a mortgage or having a family.

Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) are a way of creating opportunities for young people, however they are not guaranteed to lead to full-time employment upon completion. There is a lot of competition for places in traditionally male subjects, such as engineering, and young men are more likely to be favoured for these.

“Young women seem to be clustered into the low paid roles that they are ‘expected’ to undertake, like retail, caring and customer service. Many of these roles are part-time or zero hours contracts.”

ZERO HOURS CONTRACTS

“Zero hours contracts are a total disgrace. It’s like slavery.”

The rise in this type of employment contract is particularly detrimental to women, as they tend to be focused in areas where women typically work. While employed in this way, workers do not know from one week to the next whether they will have a wage or not.

“My daughter is on a zero hours contract and the company she works for will let her know the day before if she has a shift the next day.”

Women in these circumstances can be reluctant to refuse a shift, even at short notice, for fear they will be asked to work less than they already are. As well as providing too few hours some weeks, employers are using zero hours contracts to exploit workers and make them work more hours than someone on a standard contract.

“I know one woman who works close to 100 hours in a week sometimes, and is expected to do the job of more than one person because it’s cheaper just to pay her. She has become quite ill as a result. She ended up having to take time off work which, due to her contract, meant no sick pay. Now she’s getting more stressed and it’s having a serious impact on her mental health.”

Organising childcare, or cover for other caring responsibilities, is extremely difficult. The nature of a zero hours contract also means that it is impossible to claim tax credits to top-up income and assist with childcare costs, because there is no guaranteed income and therefore an assessment cannot be made.

The justification for the use of zero hour contracts by many employers is that it offers more flexibility, however this is far from the reality.

“Where I work, they’re trying to get people who are on full time contracts to move to more ‘flexible’ contracts, saying they’ll be good for working parents. They’re really just zero hours contracts by another name.”

It is difficult to get a mortgage, or car finance, on a zero hour contract. This is also the case for those on temporary contracts, which are common in the public sector.

“Teachers are often put on 11-month temporary contracts, which means that as well as being unable to secure finance to buy a house, they are not paid over the summer and they face stress and anxiety as to whether their contract will be renewed.”

WELFARE REFORM

Changes to the welfare benefit system introduced by the UK Government is impacting on families in and around Falkirk. As a result, there has been a significant increase in demand for emergency support, such as that provided through foodbanks.

Applications for any type of welfare benefit must now be made online. This presumes that claimants have access to a computer and the internet, as well as the skills to be able to fill out complicated forms online. If not, then those who wish to make a claim will have to travel to a local library, for example, which could be expensive depending on how far away the facility is. There are then issues with having to provide personal information in a public space.

“If you’re a woman on low pay, your first thought is not getting broadband or a smartphone, it’s making sure your kids have something to eat and clothes. My sister-in-law was sanctioned because she does not have computer skills so was struggling to get the forms filled in. She was sent on a computer course, with a really long waiting list, which is now being cut due to a lack of funding so she’s back to where she started.”

Sanctions, which can occur when the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) deem that a claimant has not fulfilled actions required in order to receive their benefit, have been described as *“harsh”* and *“unfair”*. Under the new system, those claiming certain benefits have to work a specific number of hours in order to keep receiving the money they rely on. If not, they face the real prospect of their benefits being stopped or removed altogether. This has an impact on women, lone parents in particular, who can struggle to find extra hours on top of those they already do.

“I work at the moment but have had to get another job to take me over the required working hours threshold. If I hadn’t, I would have lost the money I need to pay for my childcare. People shouldn’t be living in fear like this.”

Sanctions have been applied to people who have missed appointments they have not been informed of, or due to childcare and transport issues in attending the Jobcentre.

“Even when sanctions aren’t applied to women they fall back on us - if our partners, or kids, or other family members lose their money, we pick up the slack.”

Claimants are expected to undertake 'fit for work' assessments in order to determine whether they are eligible for Personal Independence Payment. These are undertaken by DWP staff, without input from medical professionals. Those with mental health issues are frequently deemed capable to look for work because they are physically fit. This has a detrimental impact and keeps people in a cycle of working for a short time in a low paid, zero hours job, then having to leave because of their illness. They then have to go through the assessment process again when they try to claim benefits.

"If the DWP see that you can answer the phone or walk twenty paces unaided then to them you're fit for work, even when you're absolutely not."

CUTS TO SERVICES

Cuts are hitting all aspects of community life in and around Falkirk.

"The worst thing is, it's predominantly women who work in community services or who volunteer with them so it's like a double whammy. They're losing their jobs and the women who rely on the services are missing out."

All community centres in the area currently have a crèche attached so that those attending - in the main, women - are able to attend training and courses because there is somewhere for their children to go. Due to funding cuts, the crèches will be closed by June.

"Will the classes then have to stop because the women they were benefitting won't be able to go because there's no longer provision for their kids to be looked after? This could lead to the closure of some centres overall, and again it's women who will be losing out."

One of the centres will continue to operate as a private company providing childcare services. The council will provide a contract to the company and pay for the services. However this means additional pressure on that group of women who will now have significantly more responsibilities in terms of running a business.

Services such as those which assist disabled people into employment are being forced to charge users, as otherwise funding cuts mean they would have to close altogether. This has already happened to a valuable peer support group which provided advice and assistance to teenage mothers. The group's funding was stopped and it no longer exists. People are also having to pay now for services which they did not have to in the past. Community groups were able to hire areas in libraries, school/community halls etc for free, however payment must now be made to make use of these spaces.

Significant cuts to Community Learning and Development (CLD) are having a detrimental impact on the health and wellbeing of those who use and benefit from these services.

"They have a really good understanding of how communities actually work. Their loss will be felt far and wide."

QUESTION TWO

The Commission on Local Tax Reform's remit is to identify and examine alternatives that would deliver a fairer system of local taxation (i.e. in place of Council tax) to support the funding of services delivered by local government.

In doing so, the Commission will consider issues such as

- *The impacts on individuals, households and inequalities in income and wealth;*
- *Administrative and collection arrangements that apply,;*
- *Potential timetables for transition, with regard to the 2017 Local Government elections;*
- *The impact on supporting local democracy; and*
- *Revenue raising capacity of the alternatives at both Local Government and national levels.*

In conducting its work, the Commission will engage with communities across Scotland to assess public perceptions. It will reflect this in its final analysis and recommendations.

To what extent does the current system of council tax deliver a fair and effective system of local taxation in Scotland? Are there any features of the current system that you think should be changed or any you think should be retained?

Overall, there was consensus that the way in which Council Tax is paid at the moment is not ideal, and perhaps a move towards a more income-based approach would be more beneficial. This could, however, prove problematic in terms of administration. Over the course of a lifetime, a person's income is much more likely to change frequently, whereas the cost of housing is not.

"Surely if it's income-based then people will have to end up paying more overall to cover the costs of the amount of changes required. I understand why an income-based approach would seem like a good idea, however I think the overall costs would have to be carefully looked at."

Another issue with Council Tax being paid based on income is where the income is made. Falkirk has been identified as a commuter town, with many of the people who live there working in either Glasgow or Edinburgh. Similarly, there are a lot of people who work in well-paid jobs at the Grangemouth oil refinery who live outwith the Falkirk council. This could result in income being generated in Falkirk but not benefitting the area.

“The poll tax was income based and it didn’t work. We have to be very careful when thinking about changing this.”

There are, however, arguments in support of making this form of local taxation income-based. There are a number of people who live in houses in the highest council tax banding who do not have a large income, for example older people, and they struggle to be able to pay their share.

“These people are asset rich but income poor. You see it so often with older folk who are still living in their family home, or those who have bought a bigger house and have tried to sell it but have struggled because of the housing market.”

Council Tax bandings are not based on individual property value. This can have a negative impact on families who live in an area with mixed housing.

“Someone on a low wage with four kids in a three bedroom house can be paying the same as someone along the street with three working adults and three bedrooms. Surely looking at who lives in the house and what they’re earning, as well as the value of their home, would be a fairer way of doing it?”

Local people would appreciate being given more say in the way that money collected from the Council is spent, particularly in circumstances where services are being cut and this is impacting negatively on women.

“Council staff are often invited to give their opinions, but they will usually, understandably, be most interested in protecting funding for the department they work in. More public consultation would give a much broader idea of what’s actually important to people in Falkirk.”



QUESTION THREE

What are the key priorities for women in your local area?

- Improved access to affordable, appropriate childcare.
- Ability to balance work and childcare.
- Access to education and training.
- Greater understanding of women's issues, particularly for Violence Against Women (VAW).
- Provision of Rape Crisis services.
- More counselling for those with mental health issues.
- Removal of stigma for those with mental health issues.
- More co-ordinated services which break down barriers and work together.
- Aspirational employment - work that women actually want to do - and support for them to do this.
- Equity of working conditions for women working in the private and public childcare sectors.
- Equalisation of pay.
- A public transport system which is affordable and is centred around the needs of the users, not the companies providing the services.
- Improved access to GP services, particularly in more rural parts of the Falkirk area.
- More NHS dentists.
- More social housing so that families do not need to undertake expensive and unregulated private lets.



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.