

Greenock Roadshow Report

**Mental
Health**

Benefits

**Low
Paid**

Disability

**Living
Wage**

Sanctions

**Council
Tax**

Caring

**Equal
Pay**

Schools

**Welfare
Reform**

Friday 17th February 2017

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Introduction

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) visited the Tontine Hotel in Greenock on Friday 17th 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, including Mary McGlashan from Women for Council, who gave a short presentation 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 Brexit and its impact on women and their communities. The SWC believe it is vital that women's voices are heard as part of this extremely important process.

The 2017 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.



Mary McGlashan

Women for Council (WfC) was formed in response to a crisis in women's representation in Inverclyde, where only one of the twenty elected Councillors is a woman. A group of women got together and decided that *"something had to be done"* prior to the 2017 Local Authority (LA) elections.

The group created banners and badges *"of every political hue and none"*, as well as social media accounts to promote their work. The only woman Councillor in Inverclyde spoke at the inaugural meeting about the barriers she faced in being elected. The group's following grew through social media and the response to street stalls was *"remarkable"*.

A willingness to enter politics is not enough – women of ability and experience don't or won't stand because of the barriers they face. There is still a huge difference between the official rhetoric about increasing women's participation and practical measures which are happening on the ground.

"A future without gender equality is bleak and grim, but it is avoidable if we all play our part."

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?

Health Services

Many of the services at the Inverclyde Royal Hospital are being cut. The midwife-led maternity unit is under threat of closure and the hospital has lost paediatrics, the Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT) clinic and gynaecology. Each of those departments have moved to the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Paisley, approximately 20 miles away. Women expressed real concern about the removal of this type of service and the impact it will have on the local community.

“Centralisation of health services puts everyone at risk.”

Patients and visitors can face difficulties in accessing hospitals outwith Inverclyde. Not everyone has access to a car, which means a reliance on public transport which can be unreliable, or patient transport, which can take a long time and which visitors are unable to use.

“I have a friend whose mother is badly disabled and uses a wheelchair, which has to frequently be checked at the Queen Elizabeth University (QEU) hospital in Glasgow. She cannot travel in a car so relies on patient transport, which often is unable to accommodate friends or family. My friend then has to follow the patient transport in her own car in order to accompany her mother. It causes them both a lot of stress.”

Patients can be sent anywhere within the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde area. This means that individuals in Dunoon, for example, are often sent to the new Queen Elizabeth University hospital, or women from Inverclyde have to travel to Glasgow Royal Infirmary. Little to no consideration is made as to how they be able to travel these distances.

“I’m disabled and I have to attend appointments at the Royal Alexandra Hospital (RAH) in Paisley. The most effective way for me to go there would be by train then bus, but that is not without its challenges. I have to contact ScotRail 24 hours before I travel to ‘book in’ so that the ramp will be available for me getting on and off the train. When I get to Paisley, it is difficult to get an accessible bus to take me into the hospital grounds. That’s not a bad journey compared to some other appointments I have to get to, which are at Glasgow Royal Infirmary. That journey is extremely stressful. There’s a real fragmentation of services.”

The infrastructure round the new QEU hospital in Glasgow, where many patients and visitors in the area are expected to travel to, *“is far from ideal”*. There are few transport options and parking can be extremely difficult. There is no direct bus from Greenock to the QEU hospital. Patients or visitors have to change buses at Braehead shopping centre.

“People attending or visiting the hospital have to take a whole day out to get there. This is especially the case for older people – the whole experience can be very tiring for them.”

Town Centre

The town centre used to be very busy, however the removal of many shops, particularly in the mall, has changed this.

“It’s in danger of turning into a ‘ghost town’ if many more go. All we’re left with is pound shops and charity shops. It’s really sad to see because this used to be such a thriving centre.”

There is a real danger that more shops will no longer be able to trade. Good local businesses are struggling because they can’t afford to pay rates, which are only going to increase.

“We will lose more and more local businesses as a result. The heart has been taken out of the community. There’s no local pride anymore.”

Parking restrictions can make it difficult for women to take their cars to go shopping, as well as for work. Those who need to be able to park for work in particular can encounter difficulties.

“My daughter works fairly close to town and uses the car to get there – she can’t take public transport, which would be easier, because she has to drop the kids off at school before work. Difficulties with parking means that she has to park a 10/15 minute walk from her office because that’s all that’s available by the time she gets there. She works part-time so has had to shorten her working day to walk from her office to the car to be at school in time for the children coming out.”

The high cost of parking is also a barrier. People are unlikely to pay to park in the town centre and instead will go elsewhere, like the new shopping park in Port Glasgow. This complex is well-used, however the nearest bus stop is quite far away. Shoppers are encouraged to use ‘MyBus’, a bookable service offering door-to-door transport in local areas for people of all ages who have difficulty using standard buses. Some local residents recently petitioned for a bus service to stop within the complex. This which was successful and will begin in April this year.

Cruise ships come into dock in Inverclyde, however the tourists on board do not tend to stay locally. They are, instead, taken by bus to other parts of the country such as Loch Lomond or through to Edinburgh. Inverclyde Tourist, a voluntary group made up of mostly local women, are trying to change this. They meet passengers from the ships and give them information about the local area.

“More needs to be done to encourage tourists to stay here. It’s a beautiful area, we have some stunning views and there’s a lot of local history. It’s a great place. That needs to come across to the people who visit Scotland, not just on the cruise ships, but through tourism overall.”

Population

There is an ageing population in the area. As well as that, Inverclyde has the highest percentage of disabled people in Scotland. Some of the disabilities which exist are caused or exacerbated by poverty and inequality. The geography of Greenock and the surrounding towns is also a contributing factor.

“Everywhere here is uphill. There are high instances of arthritis as a result.”

Older people and disabled people, a large percentage of whom are women, need support from services which are constantly being cut back.

“The resources which are being removed are so important to those who rely on them. What is going to happen to these people when their support is taken away?”

It is very difficult to attract 'new blood' to Inverclyde, due to perceptions of poverty and disadvantage. While families are moving to the area, they tend not to work there. Inverclyde is one of the largest commuter areas in Scotland. More and more houses are being built to accommodate the people who live in the area but work elsewhere. Houses are cheaper in the area than they are in towns closer to Glasgow.

"They've built all these houses but there's no infrastructure to go with them. Many of the people who live here don't work here but their kids are educated here, their doctors surgeries are here – local services are struggling to cope. It's putting a stress on the infrastructure of the whole community."

Employment

There are significant levels of unemployment within the area, as big employers such as IBM and the ship yards have gone. Jobs available for women are mostly low wage and low skilled and tend to be in call centres, with Amazon or in care homes. These are undertaken on zero hours contracts.

"Women are the breadwinners in this area due to the demise of the shipyards and IBM. These jobs were mostly populated by men, so it's fallen on women's shoulders to bear the burden. This is made more difficult because a lot of employers are reluctant to employ women because they come with 'added business costs' such as maternity and caring responsibilities."

It is difficult to get decent employment outwith public services such as the Council or NHS. Many women who work within the public sector are having to re-apply for their own jobs because of restructuring and funding cuts.

One of the biggest barriers to women securing 'decent' employment is the lack of accessible, affordable childcare in and around Inverclyde. Private childcare is very expensive and funded places are only available once the child is three or if they are deemed 'vulnerable' aged two.

"If families don't fit into that they struggle to obtain childcare provision. Their children are missing out as a result of Government policies which do not suit working families."

It is particularly difficult to obtain childcare for those who undertake shift work. Afterschool care is generally only open until 6pm at the latest. There are breakfast clubs available, however these do not exist in every school. This does not take into consideration those who work outwith 'normal' hours.

"Women are struggling to get work, because there's no childcare available. But the amount of money they receive on benefits is not enough to allow them and their families to get by. It's a real catch-22 situation. Some young women are having to work two or more jobs in order to make ends meet."

Childcare facilities used to be available within communities, however these have steadily been taken away as a result of funding cuts. This was the preferred option for many and their removal has had an impact at a local level.

The Jobcentre are not helpful towards disabled people who are looking for work.

"They're not equipped to meet the needs of individuals. We're in a situation where people are being sent to work in charity shops, or on short-term 'training' contracts which offer no guarantees of employment at the end. That's not right."

Most of the interaction between claimant and Jobcentre takes place over the phone or online. This makes the assumption that people have skills and knowledge, as well as access to a computer.

“There’s so little help available for people who don’t or can’t use a computer. That’s not taken into consideration though - it’s about finding a job at all costs.”

Many young people who leave to go to university don’t come back to the area because they are unlikely to be able to secure decent employment.

“All of my family have left the area to find work. They’ve had no choice - the wages are just so much better in other parts of the country, particularly in Glasgow and Edinburgh.”

Teachers within the local area who have retired have had to go back to work as supply because it is very difficult to attract teachers to the area. *“It’s considered a deprived area and that puts a lot of people off.”*

Education

Overall, there is a good standard of education in the area, however there is a significant attainment gap. A number of local schools are benefitting from support through the Scottish Attainment Fund, which is seen as a positive thing. Women also commented on how local schools have encouraged non-academic students to move into appropriate training and education.

“There seems to be, in some places, a real commitment to make sure that no young person is left behind. If they are not likely to go on to university, the schools will encourage them to find a vocation and do whatever they can to see that through.”

Despite overall satisfaction with the primary and secondary education, there is a recognition that important help and support within classrooms is starting to disappear. Classroom assistants and special educational need (SEN) support workers are being removed because of funding cuts. This will have a significant impact, especially in the long-term. A lot of children who would have been in special educational schools are now in mainstream schooling, but they are not getting the support through their education journey that they need.

With regards to further education, there has been a decline in the number of women going to college over the last few years. This is largely attributed to funding cuts and amalgamation of campuses.

“Women undertook the majority of college courses, especially those which were available on a part-time basis. Locally based learning opportunities, such as those in community centres, have also been removed. Women now struggle to access any kind of education.”

Local Services

There are a number of local services in Inverclyde which are very well used and appreciated by women in the area. ‘Your Voice’ was highlighted as being of particular importance. Your Voice has built up a reputation of trust and effectiveness over the years and has influenced decisions to ensure local services and support meets the needs of local people. Collectively, Your Voice influences and works with local statutory, voluntary and private providers, as well as national organisations to ensure they listen to the voice of local people.

“It’s a great community service, offering a ‘one stop shop’ for a variety of different forms of support, advice and guidance.”

Although there are popular, well-used services, these will only be able to survive if more people are given information about them. It can be difficult, for example, for new mothers to find out what's going on in the local area due to a lack of information.

"I'm not on social media and that's where most of the information about mother and baby groups is. More needs to be done by the Local Authority to try and coordinate information and put it in places where women are, rather than relying on them going to look for it themselves."

Cuts to Local Authority budgets have undoubtedly had an impact on the availability of local services. Funding can be difficult to obtain and decisions are often based on 'value for money' as opposed to genuine community need. Many groups do not apply for grants because of complicated forms

"There are so many hoops to jump through, applicants just give up. It's not good for local people."

As well as cuts to community services, basic Council provisions have also been subject to change.

"The roads are a mess - they're covered in pot holes. There seems to be roadworks everywhere, but all they do is patch small areas."

Local libraries are considered to be important community assets. They are individually trying their best to get people, especially children, to start using them again by setting up reading clubs and events. Unfortunately, it is difficult to generate interest in these.

"I don't think people realise that if they don't use their libraries, they will lose them."

The Police have been cut back significantly, to the point where they are stretched on every shift. There is no longer a strong presence on the streets, which creates uncertainty within communities. The public are losing faith as a result.

"The Police are sometimes seen around the streets. Many are trying to build a sense of community and respect, but they are not seen to be doing so in the right way. The Police need to learn to talk to people, show respect to young people, perhaps undertake a project with them and then the kids will learn to trust and respect the Police."



Question Two

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?

Overall, there is a fair amount of uncertainty as to how the result of the EU referendum will impact on women throughout Scotland. There is a general feeling that the long-standing effects will not be known for a long time, due to an overall lack of information from policy and decision makers.

“We’re not going to know what’s happening until it already has happened.”

There are some indicators that the situation could be worse for people in Scotland already. For example, the pound has dropped in value against the Euro and things are slowly becoming more expensive.

Women are concerned that the country as a whole will lose out because of Brexit. Europe has given much to the UK, including funding for roads, community organisations/premises, and environmental improvements. It has also provided important legislative protections for workers, in particular women workers, around anti-discrimination and maternity rights. There are no guarantees that these will continue to be respected when the UK leaves the EU.

“It’s so important that, regardless of what happens, women’s rights are protected. We’ve fought too long and hard for them to be reduced or lost altogether.”

There is a perceived lack of engagement between individuals within communities and those who are leading on negotiations. While there is recognition that the Scottish Government appear keen to listen to women’s voices, there is uncertainty as to whether this is being heard at a UK level.

“A lot of people are losing faith in politicians because they don’t seem to be talking about the important issues. We don’t know how this is going to impact on us because there’s no indication or guidance from those in charge.”

Concerns have also been raised about potential job losses in Inverclyde. Many of the major employers, such as Cigna Healthcare, are American companies. There is a real potential that they will pull out and move operations elsewhere.

“It’s hard enough to get employment in this area. If we lose another big employer, I dread to think what will happen.”

Those who support the decision to leave the EU believe it will be a positive thing, as it will give the UK more control over its own laws and finance.

“We will surely be better off not having to give significant amounts of funding to Europe, but instead be able to spend it on important things here?”

There is seen by some women to be real potential when the UK leaves the EU. For example, it can give the country a ‘fresh start’ with regards to trade agreements, as well as the removal of ‘red tape’ and bureaucracy.

“Whatever happens, we need to continue to be consulted. Decisions shouldn’t be made without the voices of real people influencing them.”

Question Three

What one thing could improve your local area?

- More support for community councils
- More support for tourism and leisure
- *“We need to get away from the idea that this is a bleak, deprived area and start recognising and celebrating the beauty and history of Inverclyde.”*
- Women need to be encouraged to enter into local politics.
- *“We need women in the Council as we have different outlooks and experiences than men. We make up the majority of society and that needs to be represented.”*
- There needs to be more provision of better, more appropriate, affordable housing at local level.
- Reduce litter in the streets – introduce local groups to deal with this
- More funding for women’s aid and refuge services is vital.
- Encourage businesses to stay in Greenock town centre, either through the provision of business breaks or by looking at the cost of rates and why these are driving local entrepreneurs away.
- More sheltered housing.
- The establishment of a women’s advice centre, offering advice, support, mentoring and childcare.
- Local Councillors should hold community sessions
- *“There is a real need for more interaction with decision makers, outwith office hours.”*
- Professional employment opportunities for women would be welcomed.
- More information about what’s happening in the local area for different groups – e.g. retired people, new mums etc
- More opportunities for apprenticeships for young people.
- Pot holes and uneven pavements make it difficult for children, parents with prams and elderly people to get around. These should be improved as a priority.
- More investment into the area is important.
- *“We need to re-establish a sense of local pride.”*
- The community would welcome a commitment to keeping the Inverclyde Royal Hospital open. The services it provides are extremely important for patients and visitors.



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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