Stornoway Roadshow Report

Mental Health  Benefits

Low Paid  Caring

Disability  Living Wage  Sanctions  Council Tax

Equal Pay

Schools  Welfare Reform

Tuesday 23rd August 2016

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Introduction

The Scottish Women’s Convention (SWC) visited the Stornoway Town Hall on Tuesday 23rd August 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 Catriona Stewart, 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 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 Catriona Stewart

Councillor Stewart opened her presentation with a welcome in Gaelic.

She then addressed the women attending and gave an outline of policies which Comhairle nan Eilean Siar are implementing and how these will support women on the island.

Councillor Stewart acknowledged the work undertaken by women in positions of power. This has a positive impact on how women are viewed.

"Having women in the positions of First Minister of Scotland and Prime Minister of the UK can be positive in ensuring that women are at the forefront of policy decisions.”
The Community
The Island has lost its sense of community.

“Back in the old times, people on the Island were more supportive of each other. They were a community. We don’t have that support anymore. The closeness of the community isn’t there. Nobody has time to be a part of the community as they are working all the time. Even women who are over retirement age are working longer as they have a fear of being poor.”

Education
Many of the smaller rural high schools have closed due to lack of money. This means that there are longer journey times for children getting to and from school - some being up to an hour and a half long. Furthermore, children are being excluded from social activities as they are further away from the town and their friends. Because of this, more families are moving out of the rural areas. There are less and less families in rural areas now.

“Carloway school closing has ripped the heart out of the local community. Shops have suffered and closed because they have less business.”

Children in first and second year of secondary school attend an ‘intermediary’ school ie a high school curriculum in their local area. This means that young teenagers continue to attend school in their community. From 3rd year onwards they travel to high school. This can be quite a stress for young people - starting a new school, meeting new people, studying for exams and travelling long distances.

“Some young people find it difficult to adjust. There are so many changes at a difficult time for their education.”

The main high school on the Island is Nicolson High School which takes pupils from 3rd year to 6th year. Once again, there are long travel times for children who are in more rural areas.

Volunteering is becoming “trendier” amongst young people as they are finding different ways of learning the things they want to do. Volunteer numbers on the Island have risen to 57% - the highest in Scotland.

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?
**Childcare**
The nursery at the local hospital was recently shut down due to lack of funding. The Council paid a lot of money towards this service, yet it was pulled without consultation. Shift workers - especially in the hospital - used this service and now find it hard to find alternative childcare.

"Childcare costs make me ask ‘why am I working?’"

Older women pick up the responsibilities of caring for their grandchildren as childcare is too expensive. There are only two schools on the Island which offer after school care.

The birth rate on the Island is rising. There are, however, not enough childcare services available to accommodate this.

**Transport**
Depending on where you live, there is no bus service. In most areas there are is no night buses.

"They did run up until about 5 years ago but they were empty so the service stopped."

The Council hold the contract for certain bus routes (eg Stornoway Town to Tolsta) and there are other companies who run different routes.

"Cuts in public transport have had a devastating impact on older people and people with disabilities."

There are worker buses that run from early morning and into the evening. However, these do not reach all routes.

"My son works and has no way to get there as he doesn’t drive. I have to get up early in the morning, drive him to work then pick him up again when he finishes. Luckily I also work and can afford to be taxi driver for us."

Over summer 2016, the Island has seen around 70 cruise ships docking in Stornoway with around 2,000 people on these vessels. Visitors are eager to use local transport to see the Island, however there are not enough services there to fulfil this need.

It is difficult for local people to get flights/ferries which tie in with mainland appointments, connecting flights, etc. This may mean travelling earlier, getting overnight accommodation or waiting a long time at the other end. Sometimes the flights are not full to capacity. Furthering this, the evening flight from Stornoway to the mainland is often cancelled at short notice.

"Sometimes the flight is only three quarters full. Why not drop the prices, then more people will travel? The locals have started to call the FlyBe service Fly Maybe."

**Employment**
There are very few modern apprenticeships on the Island which limits the choices for young people.

Lewis is a small island and is very different from a city. There are few employers, only the public sector and supermarkets. The Council are the main employer on the Islands and are the only employer with money to create more opportunities.
Most working contracts tend to be part time, temporary, relief work or fixed term (mainly to cover maternity leave and holidays.) Many employers on the Island do not believe in zero hours contracts therefore this is not much of a problem.

“I have been on the Island for 20 years and haven’t been able to get a job.”

Once young people leave school or graduate from college and university they often leave the Island or do not return as there is no work for them. The only workers that return are those who want to work in the local authority and the NHS.

Poverty
There is a high poverty rate on the Island with women especially having the burden of a low budget.

“If women on the Island have any money in their pockets, they don’t spend it on themselves. They spend it on their children and grandchildren.”

The local cost of living is 20% higher on the Island compared to the mainland. This is primarily due to higher delivery costs and exclusivity. This, coupled with the fact that wages have risen for a number of years, makes it difficult to survive.

7 out of 10 children live in a family of fuel poverty. The fuel on the Island costs roughly 7p more than the mainland. People need cars as the local transport is not reliable. More money is therefore spent on fuel.

“Sometimes it is a case of heat or eat. I couldn’t have my children go hungry.”

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**Question Two**

The Scottish Government has made a commitment to work with people across Scotland to determine how best to use the new social security powers which are being devolved by the Scotland Act 2016. The Scottish Government intends to set out basic principles around respect and dignity, with services and processes being designed with the people of Scotland at their core.

Once powers are transferred, the Scottish Parliament will have control over the following:

- Ill health and Disability Benefits
- Carer’s Allowance
- Sure Start Maternity Grant
- Funeral Payments
- Cold Weather Payments and Winter Fuel Payments
- Discretionary Housing Payments
- Some powers in relation to Universal Credit (ie splitting payments between household members)

**What are your key priorities around the design and implementation of social security in Scotland?**
Social Security
“*This tick box society is a disaster for those who are vulnerable.*”

There is only one Job Centre on the island which is in Stornoway. The Job Centre encourage voluntary work however this is not for everyone and many feel pressured to do it.

“*Some people are scared if they don’t do voluntary work that their money will get cut.*”

The timings of appointments do not fit around bus time tables making it extremely difficult for people to get to the Jobcentre on time. There are individuals who spend around 6 hours in Stornoway to ensure they get to their appointment due to the bus schedule. Some people have to do this every day.

There is a lot of jargon when filling in claims forms which makes it increasingly difficult for individuals to complete them. These forms need to be simplified and use plain, every day language.

“*There is no dignity or respect in the system at the moment. It needs to be completely overhauled.*”

Advisors need to give more concise and clear information. There is very much an approach that the person is only in for one thing. If advice was given on an individual’s circumstances then they would be able to understand what help is there for them.

“*They need to see the whole person, their skills and knowledge.*”

Those who are sanctioned can get a crisis loan from the council. This loan is only a percentage of Job Seekers Allowance and is non-repayable. This can only be applied for three times a year.

There is a foodbank on the Island which has been there for 4 years. However it is only recently that people have become more aware of the service and have started to use it. Collections are made at Tesco and the Council Offices in Stornoway.

Mental Health Provision
Depression is a huge problem on the Island.

“*People here hide that they have depression. They don’t want people to know that they have a mental health issue.*”

Due to depression, alcohol and drug abuse is becoming more problematic. Furthermore, domestic abuse is also on the rise. Many believe that this stems from depression, alcohol and drug abuse.

Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB)
There is a CAB in Stornoway which is open on Tuesday and Thursdays between 11am - 2pm. It is well used by the public but is seen as a last resort. Without the CAB, similar charities and third sector organisations, the community would struggle.

“*Citizens Advice are very good. They helped me complete the complex forms to apply for the correct benefits.*”
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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Photographs from Stornoway

Port of Ness

Bernera Beach

Butt of Lewis

Sheep on the road

Callenish Stones