



Aberdeen Roadshow Report

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) believes that cuts to local public services as well as changes to welfare benefit and tax credit systems are having a profound impact on women.

Women need to become more involved in discussions around the justice system and the referendum on the future of Scotland.

Our 2012 Roadshow programme gives women the opportunity to discuss these topics in more detail providing an insight into how these issues are having an effect on them, their families and communities.

Agnes Tolmie
Chair SWC

The SWC arranged a consultation event at the Aberdeen Advocates Library on Thursday 14th June 2012 . A cross section of women from the surrounding areas attended. The purpose of this event was to discuss issues which are relevant in Scotland at the moment, including the impact of public sector cuts and welfare reform, women and the justice system and the referendum on Scotland's future.

Recommendations will be given to the Scottish Government, as well as local politicians, on behalf of the women.

In order to obtain the relevant information for this report, the following procedures were used:

- **Flyers advertising the event were distributed throughout the town and surrounding areas.**
- **The SWC produced a set of questions which would create discussion around the issues.**
- **Discussions were facilitated by SWC staff and volunteers at the event.**
- **Notes taken throughout the process and quotes obtained from women attending form the basis of this report.**
- **Event evaluation forms completed by participants.**



Over the past 12 months, Scotland has seen cuts to local public services as well as changes to welfare benefit and tax credit systems. In what way are these having an impact on you/your family?

Caring

A distinct lack of support for carers, the majority of whom are women, in and around Aberdeen often leads to strong feelings of isolation for those who undertake these roles. Many women face 'two levels' of caring.

“Women are sandwiched between looking after elderly parents and young grandchildren.”

This double responsibility can cause stress and have a serious impact on women's physical and mental health.

There is real inconsistency in care provision for those who rely on local authority care services. In the past, one carer would attend an individual and be able to devote time and energy to that person. As a result of service cuts as well as changes to staff terms and conditions, up to three different carers can visit a person each day. This inconsistency can be very distressing for those who rely on assistance with basic tasks such as personal hygiene, cooking and dressing.

Community Services

Cuts to public services have been ongoing in Aberdeen for a number of years. An air of uncertainty amongst those who live and work in the city has been created as a result.

There is a *“perceived affluence”* towards Aberdeen and its status as the oil capital of the UK skews perceptions of the amount of poverty that exists in the city.

“Aberdeen is often forgotten as it is considered wealthy.”

Poverty and deprivation is experienced by individuals and families in a number of areas of the city. These communities rely upon support services and basic amenities in order to survive. Cuts to libraries, community centres, classes and activities are being *“seriously underestimated by decision makers”*. The long term impact of the removal of these vital services will have a ‘ripple effect’ through generations.

“Decisions are being made without considering the impact on people. It’s short-term thinking with long-term consequences.”

Council care homes are bearing the brunt of budget restrictions. Only a few Local Authority facilities remain open in the city. The rest are under private ownership. Job losses in this sector raise concern about standards of care provided, with staff over-worked and earning low wages.

Day centres have also been subject to closure. Little support remains for the elderly and disabled who relied upon these services. Respite provision is not available for carers.

Education

Community and adult education services have been *“decimated”* by the cuts. Women access courses at this level in order to gain skills and qualifications to enhance their job opportunities.

“Women are the biggest losers when these services are removed.”

The number of children excluded from school in the Aberdeen area is worryingly high, with figures standing at twice the national average. Some children are referred to Cordyce School, which supports pupils with additional needs arising from social, emotional or behavioural difficulties. Those who are not *“lucky enough to attend Cordyce”* in order to reconnect with the education system will attend local community support projects. These initiatives, although worthwhile, do not have resources to fully support the pupils.

“More often than not these children are left wandering the streets. They are suffering as a direct result of failure to manage this problem effectively.”

Fundraising is heavily relied upon throughout mainstream education, possibly creating a ‘two-tier’ education system across the city. This results in declining standards in disadvantaged areas, where families have limited incomes.

“Some schools have been asked to raise up to £2000 for ‘reading schemes’ for Primary 1 to 3. There is a real danger this will set education back in disadvantaged areas.”

Employment

Aberdeen City Council has recently introduced a ‘living wage’ for its staff of £7.40 per hour, which has been welcomed, mainly by women employees. Job stereotyping however still exists within the Council and a full equalisation of wages will not be achieved until this has been resolved. The Aberdeen Women’s Alliance have asked Aberdeen City Council for a full gender audit of jobs and salary bands.

Cuts to Local Authority budgets have resulted in significant job losses. Women have borne the brunt of redundancies, in roles such as classroom assistants, administrators and care workers. The continued threat of unemployment places additional pressure on staff.

“Nothing is functioning within the Council and morale is at rock bottom. Due to an overspend this Council has been forced to cut services for years, even before the financial downturn.”

In general there is a huge pay differential between oil workers and other workers in the city. This leads to gaps in living standards and distorts average wage figures, which are overall much higher than the Scottish average. The average female wage in Aberdeen is said to be around £13.56 per hour.

“Workers in care homes and supermarkets don't earn this kind of money. There's a real opulence vs poverty division in this city.”

“Who is going to give Aberdeen extra money to tackle its real social problems when other regions of deprivation in Scotland look so much worse?”

Welfare Reform

Changes to the benefit and tax credits systems have been *“rather drastic”*. The impact of reductions and in some cases complete removal of support is being felt across the board. Young and old people, as well as disabled people and those from disadvantaged backgrounds, are affected.

As part of new benefit assessments claimants must attend ‘fit for work’ examinations. These are considered unjust. Jobs which women are forced to apply for, or face sanctions including suspension of benefits, are often unsuitable to their needs. The lack of accessible, affordable childcare in Scotland and in many areas poor public transport, make it extremely difficult for women to undertake employment.

Confidence levels of those who have been out of work for long periods of time are often very low. Women who are expected to apply for jobs should be given support to raise both confidence and skills.

Benefit forms are excessively long and the language is *“convoluted”*. Once introduced, Universal Credit (UC) applications will only be accessible online. This makes the presumption that everyone has access to both a computer and the internet. In reality, particularly for those in deprived and rural areas, this is not the case.

Many applicants will be forced to rely upon libraries and internet cafes to make UC claims. Libraries are reducing opening hours and some are closing altogether. While some community/day centres have internet access, these are subject to the same cuts as libraries. Many who will rely on UC payments are genuinely concerned as to how they will apply for this benefit.

“The Scottish Government needs to fund support services to help alleviate all of the pressures of Welfare Reform.”

Changes to Housing Benefit payments could have a detrimental effect on many across the Aberdeen area. The proposed ‘bedroom tax’ is causing concern amongst social housing tenants. It is important that both Scottish and Local Governments focus on addressing issues around housing occupation and allocation.

Women are in contact with the justice system in Scotland on many levels. What services are available to support women in your community?

Citizen's Advice Scotland was considered the most obvious place to access advice or support. Outreach services provided by the organisation are widely praised in communities throughout the city.

"They are swamped but do an invaluable job. Continued funding for this service is essential."

Other witness and victim support services do exist but are not always known to women who need to access them. These facilities are another casualty of cuts to public services, with high training costs meaning fewer people are able to volunteer.

More advocacy services are needed, particularly for women from BME communities, those who have experienced Violence Against Women (VAW) and those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

"Many vulnerable women are frightened of the legal system and do not know where to turn for help."

The criminal justice system in Scotland is *"not competent"* in the sentencing or punishment of women offenders. Too many women are being given custodial sentences when they are not a threat to the community. Their needs are not being taken into consideration.

"Family responsibilities of those due to be sentenced should be taken into account. Imprisoning a woman for recurrent non-payment of fines is not justice for society as a whole or the children she may be trying to support."

Too many women who are imprisoned are sent to HMP Cornton Vale, away from family and support networks. HMP Craiginches in Aberdeen has a small community integration unit that houses female offenders from the local area with the intention of linking them back into the community for release. This unit houses approximately 22 women and is considered *"overcrowded"*.

Services, such as those which assist former female offenders with literacy skills, have been removed as a result of public service cuts. These were highly valued by the women who accessed them.

HMP Craiginches will be closed when the new HMP Grampian opens on the current site of HMP Peterhead. This new custom-built community facing prison will house offenders from throughout the Aberdeenshire area. Families of prisoners in the new facility will have to travel to Peterhead to visit their loved ones. This will incur further cost and considerable travel time, especially for those who rely on public transport.

There has been discussion recently regarding a referendum on the future of Scotland. Do you have enough information to make an informed decision and use your vote on this important issue?

There is not enough information available at the moment in order to make an informed decision. Many statements are hypothetical and there is little focus on what would actually happen if Scotland were to become independent or be given more tax raising powers. Clear statements of intent regarding the future of finance and business, currency, banking, passports, border control, the EU, defence and nuclear weapons are required.

The way in which information has been disseminated so far has attracted criticism.

“More information without party political bias is needed. The media isn’t always the best way to get the facts out as they can be slanted to suit the audience.”

Young voters should be included in debates and conversations about Scotland’s future. More education in schools would be required should the consultation on the referendum show support for lowering the voting age.

What can be done to make your area a more attractive place to live, shop and work?

- The roads network is badly congested. Fixing this problem would make accessing work, shops etc. much easier.
- The city centre should be cleaned up, particularly, Union Street. *“It used to be a street to be proud of. Now all we have is a heap of malls.”*
- There is nothing to bring families into the city centre in the evening - pubs are the only facilities open after 6pm at night. There should be more for families to enjoy in the city centre.
- Green spaces should be kept. Union Terrace Gardens need to be upgraded but it is vital that the green space isn't lost by building over it.
- The bus service needs to be improved. *“It’s too expensive and doesn’t serve the needs of the community.”*
- A bus stop should be placed nearer to the city’s crematorium. The nearest terminus is approximately one mile away which is wholly unsuitable.
- Direct bus routes to and from hospitals would improve access for patients, visitors and staff.
- Public safety could be improved through greater police presence and more community wardens on the streets.

Conclusions

Following on from the discussions, women asked the SWC to submit recommendations to the Scottish Government, relevant Ministers and Representatives at all Government levels. Copies will also be distributed to Non-Governmental Organisations.



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.