

Ardrossan Roadshow Report

**Mental
Health**

Childcare

**Low
Paid**

Disability

Work

**Social
Security**

**Public
Services**

Caring

**Equal
Pay**

Schools

**Welfare
Reform**

Friday, 23rd August, 2019

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Introduction

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) held discussions at the Laurieston Hotel in Ardrossan on Friday, 23rd of August, 2019, to discuss what matters to local women. A number of points were raised throughout the day which affected the town and the surrounding areas within North Ayrshire at both a local and national level.

Failure to include the voices of women in the policy making process denigrates not only their experiences, but also links back to a systematic disassociation to fully strive for equality for women. This report is intended to showcase the real situations faced by women everyday in a unique setting for both local and national policymakers and encourage women at a primary level to become more involved. It seeks to extoll the advantages of qualitative evidence from people who are most acutely affected by policy decisions but who are often not part of the decision making process.

The SWC would like to extend a warm thanks to all the women who attended on the day.



- ◆ **Prevalence of mental health problems and lengthy waiting times.**
- ◆ **A rise in addiction issues within local communities.**

6 Key Points from the Roadshow:

- ◆ **Lack of support for victims of sexual assault.**
- ◆ **Problems with social housing and trying to obtain suitable properties.**
- ◆ **The need for accessible information about where women can find services and support.**
- ◆ **Poor public transport schedules and links outwith main towns.**

Housing

Housing is a major issue within the North Ayrshire area in general. Whilst there has been an increase in the build of affordable homes for social rent, women often find themselves pushed back by the system or on lengthy waiting lists to gain accessible and affordable housing for themselves and their families, leading to overcrowding.

Comments included:

- The shortage of houses with appropriate access and facilities for those with disabilities and the elderly.
- A lack of support and advocacy for women when dealing with housing issues.
- Overcrowding as a major problem, with some being forced to use living rooms as sleeping areas, and trying to get a new house seen as an “ongoing battle”.
- Exhausting all processes in trying to get appropriate accommodation with feelings of desperation at these situations common and a lack of support.
- The points based system for social housing that is currently in play does not take into account individual cases and is seen as having little humanity or leeway for women’s personal circumstances.
- A lack of resources for women needing reassessed leading to lengthy waiting times for appropriate housing and suitable accommodation.
- Failure to rectify mistakes and errors in the system for women seeking housing.

“I worked in Health and Social Care right across the board. I used to help with advocacy but when you find yourself in that situation, it’s completely different.”

“When my health is okay, I can chase it up. But when it’s not, you can’t do anything.”

“Housing is meant to service everyone, but its failing those most in need.”

“Surely there should be a bit of humanity in the way the housing system works for women?”

“Housing needs to be seen as a woman’s issue.”

Case Study: Community Housing Advocacy Project (CHAP)

CHAP are an independent advocacy housing service situated in North Ayrshire on behalf of tenants to address homelessness and housing issues and prevention of such. Services are provided to all residents of the area and advocates support individuals to have a say in housing matters.

Advice and information is available on a range of housing issues such as rent arrears, eviction and repairs. The organisation also provides invaluable resources and support to complete applications and contact housing providers.

Key Recommendations:

- Ensuring homes are fit for purpose, including with disability access.
- Holistic approaches towards adapting housing for women's unique issues, including in new builds.
- Public consultations with heightened awareness around new social housing developments and their location and accessibility.
- Clear guidelines for women and information about accessing housing advocacy.

SOCIAL SECURITY

A number of women pointed to various issues with social security within the area. Whilst delays with Universal Credit has had a big effect on claimants, comments focused around struggles due to such limited means of income despite rising costs of living.

Women's comments included:

- Trying to juggle limited income on benefits coupled with rising costs of living is taking an extreme toll on women and their families.
- Increase in those that are struggling and barely getting by with payment delays common, leading to women having to resort to borrowing money or rely on "handouts".
- Some Jobcentre Plus staff do not take into account women's issues or mental health when processing claims.
- The toll that issues such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and anxiety have on women are commonly elevated when faced with applications and assessments for social security. This leads to a severe strain on physical and mental health and this is rarely taken into account.
- Women being signed off as capable for work when this is not the case and struggling after the abolishment of the Limited Capability for Work Element of Universal Credit.
- Lengthy delays trying to get social security issues rectified which impacts on women's health and wellbeing as well as the economic problems this brings.

Case Study: Social Security Medical Assessments

The difficulties of going through medical assessments for PIP and Universal Credit were described as a humiliating experience severely detrimental to women's wellbeing. The SWC heard firsthand how this can be a powerful trigger for issues such as PTSD or severe anxiety, despite assessors being given prior knowledge of medical records. Furthermore, the distance and time taken having to travel to medical assessment centers is disconcerting, leading to further issues. There is a lack of joined up public transport networks and fare prices when your own GP could be carrying out these processes in a comforting environment for women.

Key Recommendations:

- Greater collaborative working between personal GP surgeries and Job Centres in order for assessment processes to be as smooth and as timely as possible for women.
- Processes that should be adhered to when taking account of issues that severely affect women such as Violence against Women and domestic abuse when applying for social security.
- Better accessibility to information so women are informed of their rights and what they can claim including free school meals and grants.

HEALTH

The area is seen as having a number of problems in terms of poor physical and mental health. Lengthy waiting times for counselling have forced women to undergo costly private treatment. An over reliance on prescription medication was cited as being routine rather than the promotion of more holistic approaches towards healthcare.

Comments from women included:

- Lengthy distances having to be travelled for hospital examinations and social security medical assessments leading to pressure on women.
- Many women feeling unable to reach out for support.
- A sharp rise in suicide and self harm issues throughout communities.
- Shortage of doctors within the area for specialist issues such as back and spinal problems.
- Lack of support mechanisms in place for those dealing with mental health issues.
- An awareness that poor physical and mental health within the area is increasing for women across all backgrounds.
- High waiting lists for mental health referrals meaning irregular appointments around once every three months after waiting over a year just to undergo counselling.
- Lengthy and complicated process to access services such as Occupational Therapy.
- Not being given information around specialist medical adjustments and help that may be available for those with poor health.
- An awareness that there is support available, but not being informed of the particular processes and how to access this.

“Sometimes I can’t speak so I can’t pick up the phone to sort out problems. There are so many mental health problems for women. Older women cannot cope, single mothers cannot cope. It is always women left with the burdens.”

“You can be given every tablet under the sun and that’s how you are expected to get by and fix the problem.”

Key Recommendations:

- Increasing accessibility for information around both physical and mental health and options for dealing with these issues.
- Community hubs across the area, especially in less populated areas, where women can go to access information and support around health.
- The need to link up services to ensure collaborative solutions to mental health care and support.
- Strategies and responses to heightened forms of social isolation within communities.
- Heightened awareness and education of mental health, especially within schools.
- Wider discussions of the health effects of Violence against Women, such as PTSD and anxiety.

EMPLOYMENT AND PENSIONS

Women in the area who have suffered at the hands of pension inequality have seen their state pension age rise with little warning, requiring them to stay in work longer or undertake skills courses through the Jobcentre Plus or risk being sanctioned. This, coupled with a lack of sustainable jobs that take account of flexibility and caring arrangements is a real issue, forcing many women to undertake numerous roles or face low wages.

Women's comments included:

- The physical and mental toll on women who have been forced to work for longer periods due to the changes in state pension age coupled with caring responsibilities for grandchildren and elderly parents.
- How undervalued the unpaid work that women undertake truly is within society and the affect that this has on their health, despite the savings to the national economy this produces.
- Feelings of being undervalued and misinformed about guidelines when accessing Job Centres and under pressure to apply for as many job roles as possible for fear of sanctioning.
- The prevalence of harassment and abuse directed at women in employment leading to fears, sickness and discrimination within workplaces.
- Low pay for women in a number of female-dominated industries with little options for training or wage increases.
- Inflexibility in work places in terms of caring responsibilities and childcare.
- Limited knowledge for many women around worker's legislative rights such as the Right to Request Flexible Working.

"The Government made a decision that robbed women of their money with no justification when it came to the pensions."

“They are telling us women who should have retired at sixty to re-educate ourselves when we go to the Job Centre. Why waste money sending WASPI women on these courses? Give work to the young people and let us retire when we should have.”

“After you account for all your bills and transport, wages really boil down to nothing to feed your family on.”

Case Study: Ayrshire Growth Deal

Earlier this year, the UK and Scottish Governments signed a joint growth deal for Ayrshire which is to be spread across the three local authorities of North, East and South Ayrshire. The deal will see both the reserved and devolved Administrations invest £103 million each into the region over the next 15 years with further investment from regional partners to drive economic development, create employment and stimulate investment.

The growth deal is expected to focus investment in sectors such as aerospace, manufacturing and engineering, as well as creating a Centre for Research into low carbon energy. It is hoped that this will take account of women’s specific issues in relation to new employment and ensure recruitment and training strategies to target women’s uptake in what are male-dominated sectors are key to this investment.

Key Recommendations:

- Investments to take account of gendered discrimination when tackling underemployment.
- Strategies to increase uptake of women in predominately “male” jobs.
- Tightening of workplace harassment legislation, including adding protection against third party harassment by customers and clients.
- Focus on increasing trade union access for women in the area to encourage collective bargaining around flexible working and knowing workplace rights.

Transport

For those living in the main towns, women see themselves as quite fortunate in terms of transport. Many of the outlying villages on the other hand are seen as much more difficult to be accommodated when it comes to transport with long delays between services and high cost of ticket prices frequently cited as issues. This continues to impose obstacles on many women’s day to day lives and impedes access to employment, social security and hospital appointments.

Notable comments included:

- Infrequent buses between villages and towns which stop early in the evenings, making it hard for women who may work unsociable hours.
- Sunday timetables have to be accommodated to, with women citing having to wait for up to two hours at times for buses.

- The high cost of train fares means that this is not a viable regular option for many.
- A number of areas where new housing developments are built lack public transport facilities close by, which poses problems for new residents.
- A lack of clear access to information around bus passes or travel grants for those with disabilities or claiming social security, leading to women being out of pocket.

Key Recommendations:

- Local public consultation meetings to gather women's views on optimum utilisation of transport within the area.
- Greater connection of services between public transport such as buses and trains.
- Internal village buses for local women rather than having to rely on one service for several areas.
- Greater sharing of information on accessibility to public transport for those with impaired access.

WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION

Political and public life continues to be dominated by the presence of men. Women's representation in society across all levels is still heavily compounded due to the pressure that caring, employment and other such issues have on women who are disproportionately impacted compared to their male counterparts.

Women's comments included:

- The need for more women councilors to tackle local issues that acutely affect women in different ways and who can use their own lived experience.
- Having accessible information to encourage women from all backgrounds to become involved in public life.
- The need for more women representatives who can actively fight for women and their rights across all local communities and know local issues.

"There is still that idea of old fashioned attitudes towards women. They are just expected to get on with things."

"Just being here today and being with other women has lifted a real weight off of my shoulders."

"Organisations that are at fault need to know that women will fight for their rights and won't just sit down and take it. That's how they get away with it."

Key Recommendations:

- Community stakeholder meetings and public consultations to ensure maximum representation of women across all aspects of society.
- Local mentoring schemes for young women to encourage participation.
- Active drives to encourage uptake of board membership for women.
- Sharing of best practice in both the public and private sector to encourage flexibility and ensure women's experiences are effectively utilised.
- Encouraging real women's voices, including expanding the scope for engagement with individuals.

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

- The need for more affordable housing in the area.
- Awareness raising for mental health issues and suicide.
- Strategies to tackle low employment and low wages for women.
- Increased understanding on how addiction affects women and the area.
- Better resources put in to help with lengthy waiting times for GP surgeries.
- More advocacy organisations within the area to help with issues.
- Services to take account of anxiety disorders, such as PTSD and increased awareness that such problems have for women, both locally and nationally.
- Help to navigate the benefits system and access to information for legacy benefits and Universal Credit.

The Scottish Women's Convention would like to give warm thanks to women throughout who participated in the engagement process to ensure local voices and experiences are heard.

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.