

2022

ROADSHOW

**Caithness &  
Sutherland**

December 2022



**The Scottish Women's Convention**

# Introduction

On the 6<sup>th</sup> of December 2022 we, at the SWC, carried out an online roadshow with the women of Caithness and the surrounding area, to discuss pertinent issues. The women we spoke with stated, that their key concern was the poor healthcare provision they were receiving, which had been initiated by the rise in centralisation seen across rural areas in Scotland. They went on to explain that due to poor transport links their access to vital healthcare has been worsened further. The combination of these factors discourages new people to move to the area and encourages young people to move away, contributing to depopulation, making new economic ventures unlikely. As a result, the women of Caithness are experiencing increased financial hardship, with recent rising costs in living only likely to worsen this situation.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the women who spoke to us about the current difficulties facing the Caithness region, while also highlighting the fantastic work many women are doing to alleviate some of these issues.

## The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC):

The SWC is funded to engage with women across Scotland to ensure that their views are represented in policy and decision-making processes. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of parliamentary, governmental, and organisational consultation papers at Scottish, UK, and international levels.

The SWC gathers information using different methods, including roadshows, thematic conferences, surveys, and both in-person and online roundtable events. This submission presents the views of a range of women, reflecting their opinions, ideas and lived experience. Working together with many other equalities organisations and community groups, we use our broad network to ensure that women from a range of backgrounds are heard and acknowledged. We are continually reviewing innovative ways of engaging with women and developing our trauma-informed and culturally sensitive practice to support vital contributions from as many women as possible.



# Healthcare

While speaking with women from Caithness and surrounding areas, it was clear that one issue was considered to be of vital importance: healthcare. They explained that through increased centralisation, many services had been moved to Inverness and taken out of the local community. Women explained that this was particularly prevalent across women-focused services, with the gynaecological cover being provided as not sufficient to maintain a healthy population. However, it is not just women's health being put at risk, the increased centralisation has caused other services, such as dentistry, orthodontics, and physiotherapy, to be moved to Inverness. Women stated that their increased input, alongside a move back towards local services, could limit the detrimental impacts of centralisation.

**“I think we would hate to see any more centralisation; we just want to see things coming back to us.”**

**“Our service has dramatically declined, and a lot of it is to with centralisation. Over the last six or seven years, we've lost a lot of local services and it's having a massive impact.”**

Centralisation has also made it more commonplace to travel long-distances to receive healthcare. Women explained that they have, at times, had to travel these arduous journeys after surgery, further worsening their health and lengthening recovery times. This has also had an impact on newborn babies, with new mothers having to invest in specialised car-seats as it is not recommended for newborns to sit upright for longer than two hours.

**“We've got women driving themselves home after a D&C for miscarriage... it's just shocking!”**

Furthermore, the inevitable result of long journeys is overnight stays in cities, either due to appointment times or poor public transport links. Women stated that it was likely they would have to use annual leave to cover the number of days required for their treatment, which they felt was unfair and did not give them the same level of service as other parts of Scotland. They highlighted that annual leave is given to allow workers to rest and recuperate, not receive, potentially stressful, medical care.

**“That time off is supposed to be a time for yourself, to recuperate, to recover, to actually take time off to enjoy your life. It shouldn't be, and it's not supposed to be used to constantly access healthcare.”**

**“Annual leave is meant to be there for you to recover and rest...you know we work to live, not live to work.”**

This also has a major financial impact on women's lives, with public transport costs, fuel and accommodation becoming major considerations for rural communities when accessing healthcare. Women explained that it was common to stay overnight prior to and/or after appointments in Inverness or Aberdeen, due to poor transport links and long distances. These costs are not always fully reimbursed, and women stated that if they didn't have the funds before their appointment, they were unable to attend. Therefore, the lack of financial support is a further barrier to rural communities and their access to healthcare.

“...you have to have that money in the bank to access transport, to book accommodation, and looking at the where the financial climate is just now, where is that money coming from for those families?”

“I went down to Inverness for ultrasounds and bloods...We ended up spending £400 on accommodation...I think it was eight weeks before they sent the money over; well into two mortgage payments. It was a £200 repayment, because it’s £50 per head, per night...that’s us £200 out of pockets.”

Women also highlighted that the mental health care is currently poor across the Highland region. They stated that feelings of loneliness and isolation had significantly increased as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, with many women struggling to socialise due to poor transport links and the inherent rurality of Highland life. As a result of insufficient mental healthcare provision, third sector organisations have been increasingly relied upon to cover gaps. Yet, due to increasing costs across the board, these organisations are struggling to maintain the services they currently provide. Furthermore, there has been an increase in worry for young people’s mental health, with there being considerable waiting lists to receive support and a lack of community offerings creating a sense of boredom across the Highland region for young women.

“I’m just going to point out that the majority of support for mental health issues is through third sector organisations, rather than the NHS; they’re doing the heavy lifting.”

“My organisation was set up during Covid times, at that point we were more crisis-based intervention because that was a very difficult time, we had a spell of suicides for a while.”

“There’s a massive gap for teenagers around mental health. It is really worrying. I have a good friend who’s had a horrendous time with her daughter recently, she’s been on her hands and knees to get her the help she needs”

Another issue women faced throughout contact with medical staff, was a feeling of not being believed and experiencing an increased likelihood of gaslighting. Many of the women spoken to explained that gaslighting has become more common, particularly during discussions with GPs and when seeking guidance on women-centred health conditions. They stated that more education for medical professionals and more gynaecological services were key in reducing the possibility of these experiences.

“...from personal experience it’s just not being believed with things at the doctors... I’ve had thyroid issues and there’s a lot of dismissal”

“...it can be difficult to be taken seriously for referrals. People are finding it very difficult, and coming away from appointments, feeling really let down”

“It’s nothing like it used to be, there’s a lot of gaslighting, which never used to happen.”

# Transport

Transport is also a major concern for the women living in Caithness and the surrounding area, with the A9 being of particular worry. They stated that the A9 is regularly closed, limiting their access to the rest of Scotland, and that the road itself is incredibly dangerous. Women explained that the high numbers of wildlife in the area, alongside a poor road surface and hazardous driving behaviour, has created a precarious situation. They went on to explain that bad weather over the winter months further worsened this issue, due to ice and snow, and that the summer months were becoming increasingly troubling because of the growing numbers of tourists travelling to the area for the North Coast 500 (NC500) route. Many of these tourists are travelling in campervans, and as such are clogging the main artery which connects these rural communities with the central belt and beyond.

**“I think we saw six dead deer on the side of the road...and about four or five overtakes which could have been accidents... it’s just so dangerous.”**

**“We tend to focus in on winter a lot as a difficult time, but summer is difficult now too because we have this NC500 route...there’s this constant worry that if someone needs to get to hospital in an emergency to Inverness, they won’t be able to.”**

Furthermore, women stated that the public transport links are very poor in the area, with many towns and villages being isolated further. We were told of inconsistent bus services, and that bus stops can be in unsafe locations: on national speed limit roads and/or on small grass verges. Lack of accessibility greatly limits who can use this inconsistent bus service, with those suffering from mobility issues facing discrimination and barriers. Women also highlighted that due to the poor bus links, women were struggling to socialise and meet with friends, contributing to poor mental health in the region. With women being more likely to utilise public transport, this particular issue is highly gendered, and therefore, a gendered lens must be incorporated to effectively manage transport in the Highland region.

**“We only have certain bus times, and less than a handful a day.”**

**“Sometimes people are getting picked up on the road...they were having to stand on the verge with traffic going by at 60mph”**

**“...buses are not suitable, especially if they have a walking aid. They really come up against discrimination, drivers quite often tut at them, or they won’t lower the ramp.”**

**“Isolation is something very dominant here, and it links well with our poor transport links as women living in rural areas can’t access other people.”**

Women also discussed the recent free bus pass scheme for young people, with many explaining that despite being good in theory, the inconsistent service made this programme almost pointless. They referred to instances where buses broke down, didn’t show up, or left vulnerable children behind as their passes wouldn’t swipe. Women explained that they applauded the policy but did not feel that the necessary infrastructure had been put in place to effectively implement it across Scotland.

“My son has autism and ADHD, and he was coming home from school, but his card wouldn’t swipe so the bus driver left him behind. So, even though we have these things in place, it doesn’t always work”

“It’s great to have the free bus passes, but if the bus never shows up it doesn’t really work.”

Other forms of public transport were also criticised by women in Caithness, with the train and flight services being deficient. Women highlighted irregular timings, and a lack of cohesiveness in planning, with buses arriving before/after ferries, planes, and/or trains had departed. This has been worsened by a reduction in flights to the central belt, with women stating that as a result they struggled to make hospital appointments and opportunities to attend work events. With regards to train services, women felt that they faced high prices, which did not match the poor service they experienced: citing cold trains and a lack of food and drinking facilities. This discomfort only added to difficult circumstances, with many women having to make the journey to access healthcare. Therefore, it is clear that the entirety of transport facilities in the Caithness region need considerable rethinking.

“The links between public transport doesn’t make any sense... the train that gets into Inverness at the earliest, gets in after the clinic is shut at Raigmore hospital, and then you can’t get back to Caithness that day, so it’s a three-day job.”

“The last time I took the train it was terrible...the heating was broken, and there was no tea or coffee...and then at the appointment I was told I could have skin cancer, and then had to sit on a train with that on my mind... And it just seems like we’re paying the same as a lot of places in the UK, but we’re receiving a much poorer service.”

Another issue raised by women, is the increasing use of car shares amongst young people within rural communities. It was stated that due to the lack of public transport, as well as poor facilities for young people within this villages and towns, they are forced to congregate in difficult to access locations, with insecure transport options. This has resulted in a large number utilising car sharing, which increases chances of distraction-related accidents.

“...what we’re seeing an awful lot of, is young adults having car accidents with a car full because they’re giving lifts, and we’re seeing the knock-on effect on mental health issues and physical injuries.”

“Before you know it there’s music playing, someone’s taking pictures, people are screaming, the roads are bad, they’re not well-lit...I’ve definitely had to get lifts home from people and felt unsafe.”

# Employment and Opportunities

The lack of employment and opportunities available in the area was also discussed during our conversations with women. They explained that due to the poor infrastructure in place, new businesses were not encouraged to settle in Caithness, as they would inevitably struggle to access employees and customers. This was highlighted by one business owner, who explained that as a result of poor public transport and rurality, employees could not always make it to work, unless they had access to their own car. She stated that this was particularly difficult for young people, with those unable to receive lifts from carers, not having access to the same opportunities as young people who did. The knock-on effect of this issue is further economic disadvantage for those already facing financial difficulties – deepening social inequalities.

“I’ve found when training teenagers, it’s the kids from the wealthier families, who have the money to drive their kids back and forth from work, that don’t rely on buses, that are getting the opportunities. While the kids who aren’t as well-off, but who are just as talented, aren’t getting the opportunities.”

“We’ve had some smashing kids, who are so bright and talented, but they’ve had to leave because they can’t get to us...there’s a huge gap in accessing opportunities.”

In addition, by continuously cutting the services available to these communities, it is less likely that new families will move into the area. Women explained that they had known of many circumstances where highly skilled individuals had hoped to move into the Highlands, but after carrying out some inquiries, were put-off by poor transport links and the lack of access to critical healthcare: particularly gynaecological care. As these areas have become increasingly unattractive to young, skilled individuals, the impact of depopulation is becoming more obvious, which then leads to a further limiting of services to those who remain. It is therefore a continuous cycle of diminishing resources, greatly impacting the women of Caithness.

“There have been instances of career professionals, who would have brought incredible things to the area, they looked at houses, secured the mortgage and then looked at the healthcare and thought, sod this, and buckled.”

“By having such poor gynaecological care, they’re discouraging women from the region...there’s an impact on society and it stops women from accessing career progression”

Women from Caithness also stated that a further barrier to more women accessing employment, is the lack of childcare in the area. Due to inadequate childcare options for working women, they are forced to take on unstable work, or no work at all, to ensure their children are being cared for. This is a worsening issue, with grandparents working to a higher age than in previous generations, meaning that paid childcare can be the only options for many mothers. They went on to explain that as a result there have been instances of young women leaving school early, in order to provide childcare for their younger siblings.

“Childcare is a significant issue for us, and it means that women are always a step backwards, we can’t progress”

“...grannies are working longer now, they’re not retiring at 60, so there’s no childcare there whatsoever.”

“A lot of young women are becoming carers to younger siblings, and effectively becoming parents.”

It was also indicated that women struggle to enter the self-employed labour market, due to structural barriers, which do not facilitate women’s entrepreneurship. Currently, self-employed individual’s receive poor maternity and sick leave, which has an impact on their ability to remain profitable during periods of sickness or after/while having children. This was particularly difficult for women with long-term health conditions, such as endometriosis, with long periods of time needing to be taken off for hospital appointments. It was suggested that current payments had to increase, and new social security could be put in place to help keep women in the self-employment sector.

“...there isn’t anything for self-employed women, and it’s no small wonder that we’re in a minority in the UK because there’s nothing in place. Even maternity leave, we get a hell of a lot less”

“As someone who hasn’t had access to annual leave because I’m self-employed, I don’t get statutory sick pay either... The system is not made to help you if you’re self-employed, especially if you’re ill.”

“If they want more women in business, they have to support them all the way around, even if it was a cost of living grant for chronic conditions... it’s really stressful knowing we have to save our money for the next operation, not for the next holiday, or the next wedding, or birthday.”





# Rural Poverty

As has been alluded to, the above points have combined to create a difficult economic situation, which is directly impacting women and their families. Some of the women we spoke with, worked within economically deprived communities, providing resource support and advice services. They explained that soaring food costs within small village shops, and a lack of access to supermarkets, has created an unsustainable economy for rural women.

“...a massive thing...is the impact with food. If you live rurally, and you don't have access to transport, you're using your village shop with majorly enhanced prices.”

“We've had a lot of mums contacting us because they've had to live out of the village shop, and their money can't stretch that far... the best budgeting in the world couldn't stretch to that.”

These rising costs are then having a detrimental impact on women's health, with mothers having to choose between eating themselves, or feeding their children. In order to combat this issue, it was recommended that free school meals should be provided for all children and young people, across nursery to high school. Women felt that making this move would provide all young people with a hot meal, as well as combat the stigma associated with free school meals.

“We regularly see the situation, where mum is going hungry, because what do you do? Are you feeding the kids, are you putting money in the meter?”

“Giving them all free school meals would make it equal, there would be less resistance”

Furthermore, due to the extensive strain women and families are experiencing across these areas, third sector organisations are being relied upon heavily. They explained that they were having to provide a record number of food parcels and free meals for kids. This is a continuously worsening situation due to the recent cost of living crisis and the reduction in third sector finances. Therefore, women in Caithness wanted to highlight that if third sector organisations and community facilities were properly funded, the recent difficulties could be alleviated.

“The local foodbank hasn't been busier; they're forever calling out for things and it's not just the same bracket of families... there's a much wider bracket that are starting to need it now”

“...there's a lot of good things being done, but if it wasn't for community and charitable groups, the area would be struggling. It is struggling anyway, but it could be worse.”

Another major issue contributing to rural poverty within Caithness is the rise in fuel prices. The cost of fuel has risen to extraordinary levels and due to the remoteness across the region, many have multiple forms of fuel: oil, gas, coal, electricity, and wood. Women highlighted that a lack of access to town gas means they have little choice but to use non-renewable fuel sources. They therefore felt that price caps on oil would be a valuable exercise to limit the impact being felt by rural areas.

“We don't have access to town gas, so your coal, oil, electric heating, which are all hugely inflated... and the support is not there for that.”

“Lots of folks have come to us, and they have been budgeting appropriately, but your oil fill has gone from being £300 for a 500ml fill, to actually well over £700”

## **Conclusion**

Ultimately, the issues caused by centralisation are all inextricably linked and have begun to erode the community services in Caithness and the surrounding areas. These areas are facing a healthcare shortage, which is being fuelled by unacceptable transport links: public transport options are insufficient, and the A9 road is notorious for accidents and carelessness. Furthermore, due to poor infrastructure, businesses are less likely to invest in these areas, choosing the central belt instead, leading to inadequate opportunities for local women. However, despite these hurdles, the community spirit remains intact due to the support networks put in place by women and third sector organisations across the Highlands.

## **8 Key Recommendations**

Below we have highlighted eight key recommendations we believe align with the wants of the women of Caithness:

1. Major redevelopment of the A9 road to ensure safety for residents.
2. Provide increased inclusive, public transport links in rural areas, connecting towns and villages to improve safety and give people the ability to access others.
3. Reverse the focus on centralisation and give rural communities more say in their local services.
4. Put in place increased financial aid for individuals who have to travel long distances to access healthcare and remove the need for women to use annual leave to cover time off when accessing necessary healthcare.
5. Improve education for all: including healthcare professionals, to ensure women's health concerns are not dismissed.
6. Provide increased support for self-employed women, including sufficient maternity leave and sick pay to align with the Scottish Government's goals of encouraging more women to become entrepreneurs.
7. Provide free school meals for all children to reduce stigma and ensure that all children in Scotland have access to hot meals.
8. Increase funding support for third sector organisations.

For further information or to share your views, please contact:

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