



Dumfries 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 DG One Centre in Dumfries on Monday 2nd July 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?

Employment

There is a serious lack of employment in and around Dumfries. For young people who choose to remain in the area, there are limited opportunities for training in modern apprenticeships. Empty shops and a lack of money in communities to start up new businesses also has an effect on employment.

“There’s nothing for young people leaving school”

Agriculture, the public sector and tourism are some of the major employers in the area. Women make up the majority of the public sector workforce and many are employed on a temporary basis. They are aware of the impact of cuts and redundancies however *“are not complaining about changes in services and conditions - we’re just glad to have a job”*.

Dumfries and Galloway Council have recently introduced ‘Single Status’ equality wage deals. Under new structures, those in temporary posts were to be provided the opportunity to retrain for permanent jobs. This has so far not been the case.

“So much amalgamation of jobs has led to one person doing the job of three people.”

A meat factory based in Kirkconnel, a village approximately 30 miles from Dumfries, has a large workforce and is considered the biggest employer in that area.

“They don't pay a great wage but they're often the only jobs available.”

The ever-increasing age for retirement is of real concern.

“It's not right that people are forced to keep working. Let it be down to the individual. Each person should be allowed to choose when they stop.”

Many women have worked from a young age and are continuing to do so into their sixties. The geographical nature of the area means they often have to travel to get to work which becomes more tiring.

“It gets harder as you get older.”

More should be done to encourage companies to bring in trainees to learn jobs when an older person reaches retirement age. The outgoing employee could use their skills and expertise to ensure the new member of staff is adequately equipped to do the job. This would boost employment in the area and ensure that people who have reached retirement age are able to leave their jobs as and when they choose to do so.

Health

NHS24 was subject to criticism. Waiting for a call back from the service can delay crucial medical treatment, especially given the distance that has to be covered in order to access hospitals. Many take it upon themselves to go straight to hospital in order to avoid unnecessary waits.

“It just doesn't work for rural people.”

In the past, on-call doctors served smaller towns and villages, which ensured those requiring urgent assistance were seen to. Reinstating this service would better serve the needs of rural communities. As well as ensuring treatment, patients may not have to be unnecessarily removed from families and support networks.

The doctors surgery in Lockerbie has been rebuilt and is now much bigger. Appointments can be difficult to obtain, with patients waiting around two weeks for an emergency appointment and up to six weeks for a routine appointment. The surgery is closed for holiday and in-service days which can mean waiting longer for appointments and being unable to obtain medication.

Transport

Public transport is *“very poor”* across Dumfries and the surrounding areas. Buses are very expensive and timetables are subject to change during school holidays, in the evenings and at weekends. For women who work part-time hours, using buses can be *“very problematic”*. This is especially true for those living in outlying towns and villages who may have to travel some distance in order to get to work or to access education.

Trains are also infrequent and the cost of rail fares is ever-increasing. Limited services to Glasgow and Edinburgh cause women in the area to miss out on a number of activities.

“Women in Dumfries are isolated from the best cultural aspects of Scotland.”

Poor public transport means that car ownership is a necessity and not a luxury. Cars are expensive to run, particularly as fuel prices continue to rise and poor road conditions increases the cost of repairs.

“It is the trap of living rural - we cannot afford a car due to the price of petrol and insurance, but there is no public transport. We're in a Catch-22 situation.”

Voluntary Organisations

Protection of local community groups is vital. They are an important source of support for those who attend them, particularly the number of women's groups in the area.

“Women are comforted by other women when they talk about their problems”

These groups are a major factor in ensuring that women, particularly those in rural areas, do not feel isolated. Services such as meals on wheels and the 'food train' provide assistance to some of the most vulnerable members of the community and are subject to funding cuts.

“The Government are not doing anything to fill the gaps left by these services. This will have nothing but a negative effect on people.”

Recent reorganisation of the voluntary sector in Dumfries and Galloway has caused confusion amongst organisations. Time has been spent getting used to new structures and has meant valuable resources have been taken away from the service users.

Welfare Reform and Benefits

“The Government keeps cutting money which means our purses get tighter. The sums just don't add up.”

Changes to welfare benefits under the UK Coalition Government Welfare Reform Act are already having an impact across the region. The proposed 'bedroom tax' is of particular concern. Under this proposal, people who live in social housing and are deemed to have a 'spare' bedroom will see a decrease in the amount of housing benefit they receive. Similarly, changes to working hours thresholds for tax credits will cause many women to lose out on money that they need in order to survive.

“There are no guarantees that employers will be able or willing to give us extra hours to qualify for tax credits. I need this money for my children.”

Processes to assess a person's fitness for work and how that impacts on the amount of benefit they receive are considered to be *“grossly unfair.”* Reassessments are causing anxiety and depression.

“There are far too many people becoming physically and mentally ill wondering if they will be able to afford to live in the future. People realise these cuts have to happen but they have to be done in a fair way.”

Universal Credit (UC), which will combine up to eight of the current welfare benefits available, comes into force in 2013. Claims for UC must be made through the internet and applicants will be expected to manage their own applications in an online account. Not all women have access to a computer and in rural areas broadband connection is very slow. Many will be forced to rely on internet access in e.g. libraries and job centres, where computers are in open spaces and confidential information may be readily seen by others.

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

Despite Citizens Advice Scotland and Women's Aid being cited as the main information points for women in contact with the justice system, there is a lack of overall knowledge of support services in the area.

"I'm not too sure where you would go to get advice on the legal and justice system. You wouldn't know what support was available until you needed it."

There is a specialist Violence Against Women Unit in Dumfries and Galloway Police, however most services are based in Dumfries itself and do not extend to outlying towns and villages.

There is a lack of female police officers in the area. This can make it very difficult for women to disclose instances of domestic abuse as most of the officers are men. There are a few female community police officers, however women are often unwilling to talk to them as they can be known in the community. More provision of police officers from other towns and villages in instances of violence against women would be welcomed.

"I don't want to be talking about my private life to the daughter of someone I've known for years. I would rather discuss things with a complete stranger."

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?

Overall, there is not enough information available to the general public in order to be able to make an informed decision on Scotland's constitutional future.

"I don't even really know what it's about."

There is not enough concrete information as to whether Scotland is capable of *"going it alone"*. Not enough discussion has taken place round what would be gained and/or lost by becoming an independent nation.

There is a real worry that the public will not be adequately informed about the consequences of the referendum. This could result in a decision being reached that does not fully represent the views of the people of Scotland.

People who live in the Dumfries area but cross the border to Carlisle for work, shopping etc require more information as to who their taxes will be paid to, whether they will be required to pass through border control on a daily basis and whether Scotland and England will have free exports. Questions also need to be answered regarding defence, currency, EU membership and a Scottish Welfare State.

Information should be disseminated to the public through leaflets and letters. There has been much discussion on TV but this can be biased and often does not offer plain speaking explanations. This can make the referendum even more off-putting.

"If things are written down you tend to take them in better."

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

- More investment for shops and businesses is required. There are a number of empty premises across the region but people do not have the money to buy or let them. *“If you want decent goods you have to travel.”*
- More employment opportunities. *“Give women proper full time jobs so they do not have to rely on part-time, unstable wages.”*
- More assistance for carers to allow them adequate respite.
- Better transport is a necessity with affordable fares.
- Speed limits on B roads should be kept to as many accidents occur unnecessarily.
- Ensure roads are kept in good condition, particularly after bouts of bad weather.
- More money should be invested in children’s groups and youth clubs. *“There needs to be funding for projects to keep kids of all ages occupied.”*

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.