

THE SCOTTISH WOMEN'S CONVENTION

SPRING
2020
DIGITAL
ROADSHOWS

REPORT

Inverness

Tuesday 12th May





Introduction

The current circumstances during the Coronavirus pandemic have turned our lives upside down. The SWC recognises that each woman will have a unique experience of this time, due to where you live, your job, your health, the relationships you have, your family circumstances, and so much more. It is important that we continue to engage with women across Scotland - listening to your issues and concerns, and working with decision makers to ensure you are heard.

With all of this in mind, the SWC has undertaken a series of digital roadshows across Scotland – engaging with women and trying to understand the unique issues faced by different communities. Women who have been unable to attend these meetings have contributed to the discussions via email and online survey. Their views are also reflected in this report.

6 Key Points

- Service support for women with mental health issues.
- Fear over the number of sexual violence cases being postponed due to Court closures.
- Need for help for vulnerable women in rural communities.
- Assistance required to support hospitality industry in and around Inverness, where women are the dominant workers.
- Volunteers required to help with those experiencing isolation.
- Longer term funding needed to aid local communities.

Communities

Communities are doing incredible stuff. Local Facebook pages are really useful with complete strangers helping out.

One rural community saw immediate volunteering with the area divided in to zones so that local people could target a particular area. A community hub was set up with a fundraising box where locals could drop off goods for those in need. Local social media connected the community. People are putting notices in their windows to say when they need help. It is all very positive. The community feels safe, calm and reassured.

“I’ve lived here a year and hardly seen a soul. But the community has really come together and supported one another in a time of need.”

In Inverness, UHI (University of the Highlands and Islands) is providing funding to ensure students keep online while at home. This means that they are able to continue with their studies. Financial support for equipment and access to broadband is being offered.

‘Ability Net’ (<https://abilitynet.org.uk/>) through ‘Sight Action’ (<https://www.sightaction.org.uk/>) has been supporting the community with IT and online communications.

More needs to be done to raise the issue of isolation. Many in rural communities need help with daily tasks like shopping or prescriptions. There are loads of volunteers but how do people in need access them?

Mental Health

There is a need to be proactive in accessing services – for example phoning the Council helpline to gain access to prescription or grocery delivery. People with mental health issues, however, are often not strong enough to do that.

“People are doing without.”

Those who have recently suffered from mental health issues do not know how to access support. Breathing Space (<https://breathingspace.scot/>) and the Samaritans (<https://www.samaritans.org/scotland/samaritans-in-scotland/>) are overworked. Helplines are being staffed by new volunteers who are not properly trained and who may give wrong advice.

Service provision has turned from a 2-3 hour a week visit into a 2-3 minute phone call. Those looking for support need to know that they will not have to tell their story over and over again to strangers. They need continuity.

Mental health issues are increasing. Families are in confined spaces leading to a growth in stress and anxiety. Women experience the burden of this either to themselves or others within their home. Domestic abuse is also on the rise but in many rural communities it is hidden. Women will not talk about what is happening behind closed doors. Social media is so important for women to access local assistance.

Sexual Violence Services and Support

Public sector support services and the voluntary sector in and around Inverness seem to be providing advice and assistance to vulnerable individuals. Others who have had to close or furlough staff have not intimated this. For advocates supporting vulnerable women, this can prove challenging. Services, which may in the past have given support, are not always there when women need help. This increases stress and anxiety amongst women who are victim survivors of sexual violence and rape. The third sector is coming together where it can and providing as much support, advice and advocacy as possible. National and local organisations are also working together. Rape Crisis Scotland recently received a donation of mobile phones with money topped up on the sim card. Some of these were received in Inverness and given to women in need.

Courts are currently closed. There was a backlog of sexual violence cases prior to COVID19. This will only increase as a result of lockdown.

Trial dates are booked months in advance – they are in the diary. Women prepare themselves for giving evidence and attending court. It is a traumatic experience which can then be cancelled at short notice. How do women deal with this? What is it doing to them and their families? How does this affect their mental health?

Women's organisations have asked for non-jury trials at this time but this does not appear to be an option

Volunteers are *“propping up”* support services. Many are not offering 1 to 1 support. *“There is a lot of uncertainty for women who need help.”*

Government funding will be required, when courts open, to support women whose cases have been delayed. There will be issues when things start to go back to normal. Women will have to prepare themselves again for a court trial and facing their perpetrator.

With regards to support services for women, there is currently a backlog which will take years to clear. The waiting list will get longer with no recourse for women who have been subjected to sexual violence. There needs to be support to get courts back up and running. Court cases will need to be condensed. So, what is going to be cut – witness reporting? This will damage the victim survivor's case.

Advocacy workers need support and resources – this means more staff.

“Women need to get out of this horrible waiting.”

Care

“Who hasn't asked for help? How do we approach them?”

There are a number of vulnerable individuals in rural communities who are not getting support. The Scottish Government has setup a Helpline but people need to access it. Those who are struggling with isolation and a lack of technology may not know about this resource.

Some care homes in the area do not have access to WIFI. It can be very isolating for the workers and the families of those in the homes. Social media, videos and email are often the only way in which care homes can communicate with families at this time. This could be an ongoing issue after lockdown if processes are not put in place.

We need to value support workers in the community. Many work for private sector employers. They are earning below the living wage but are the eyes and ears of our communities, checking on the vulnerable and making decisions about support. In rural areas, these workers are often the only person who is in contact with a client. They also travel vast distances to provide care and support.

Education

Parents schooling their children has become part of daily life. But, how do they educate all children? Moving forward, there will be a huge educational attainment gap as children will be taught in different ways.

“Women should not be stressed about not delivering schooling.”

The priority, at the moment, should be that children are safe, happy and well looked after.

Work

The hospitality industry will be one of the last to open. Rural areas rely on hospitality to survive. The Inverness Bed and Breakfast Association (<https://www.invernessbedandbreakfast.co.uk/>) supports the self-employed and small businesses in the industry. Hotels in the Highlands have already started to go up for sale as owners do not think that they will financially survive COVID19. This will have a knock-on effect to families leading to poverty, isolation and unemployment.

“We are vulnerable communities and need support.”

“Because I’m the mum, everything’s on me to make everything ok. You need to have all the answers and if not, you’re not doing your job.”

Because of COVID there has been a number of redundancies in key services. Advocacy and support services are using volunteers, who may not have the experience or knowledge, to provide those looking for support and guidance. This may prove detrimental when applying for benefits or other financial help.

Women make up the majority of part-time workers in rural communities. Many have been laid off with little chance of a new job. There was uncertainty around a few employers in the retail sector prior to lockdown. People are now concerned about the fall out and where new jobs will come from.

Thank You

Thank you to the women who joined our online discussions, as well as those who contributed to the discussion via our online survey and by email. The information contained in this report will be forwarded to local and national decision makers for their consideration.

Website - www.scottishwomensconvention.org

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