



Kyle of Lochalsh Roadshow Report 21 May 2013

The SWC (Scottish Women's Convention) recognises that women are having to re-train and up-skill in order to enter into, sustain or progress in employment. Barriers also exist in accessing advice, assistance and resources to support women.

The current financial climate, with cuts to public services and changes to welfare benefits, is severely impacting on the ability of women to fully integrate in employment, education and society in general.

Women also need to become more involved in discussions around the referendum on the future of Scotland. What do women want or need from decision makers after September 2014?

The 2013 Roadshow programme gives women the opportunity to discuss these topics in more detail. It is important that women are given an opportunity to express how political decisions impact on them, their families and communities.

Agnes Tolmie
Chair, SWC

The SWC arranged a series of events in Skye and Lochalsh in order to meet with women and to discuss important local issues.

The roadshow held in Kyle was attended by women from throughout the area. Many women expressed an interest in attending the event, however were unable to due to a number of factors. Long working hours, (most often in the tourism and hospitality industries), women working more than one job and a lack of childcare and transport resulted in some not able attend the events. These women were given copies of the roadshow questions and their voices and opinions are reflected throughout the report.

The event was promoted through direct communication with organisations and individuals in the area. Discussions around the questions were facilitated by SWC staff and volunteers. Notes taken throughout the process and direct quotes from the women attending form the basis of this report.

Copies will be sent to the women who participated as well as key decision makers at local and national level.

What opportunities are there for formal and informal learning, training and education in your area?

Formal Education

There are two institutions in the area. West Highland College has centres in Broadford and Portree, which offer full and part-time courses. The college has developed from a small learning centre into an educational establishment offering full time study opportunities.

Sabhal Mor Ostaig (SMO) is the Gaelic Centre for Excellence in Scotland. It offers courses for beginners in the language as well as undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. All are taught completely in the medium of Gaelic.

Small numbers attending courses is the biggest challenge faced by those providing further and higher education. As college funding tends to be based on student numbers, this policy is having an adverse impact on provision available in rural areas.

"It's difficult to sustain the courses that are running at the moment, let alone establish new ones."

Overall funding cuts to further education have seen the removal of a number of part-time courses, the majority of which are undertaken by women.

"Living in a rural area leads to real constraints in accessing the same courses as those who live in bigger towns and cities."

West Highland College has recently increased course provision, with subjects such as administration, childcare and health and social care now available. The college building is also expanding. These changes are welcomed by the community.

Courses are considered to be geared more towards young people and do not take into account the needs of women who have caring responsibilities, or those who are in employment.

Informal courses used to be available, however these have been *“scaled back”*. SMO offers some summer courses in both Gaelic and English but these are limited. Highland Council provides funding for one day courses, for example European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) and IT courses. Informal education is seen as an excellent way of bringing women together, as isolation is a huge issue.

“Learning is a way of growing. It’s an essential, not just a luxury.”

Online learning is an option, however this can be expensive and broadband speeds can make it very difficult. The Individual Learning Account (ILA) used to be available to most people, however changes to applications have meant that many no longer qualify for this type of funding.

A focus on learning for all ages and levels is more apparent. The services available, coupled with increased confidence, has meant that more women are taking up courses, re-training and improving their skills.

Education and Training in Employment

Opportunities to up-skill, retrain and develop in the workplace are very difficult, mainly because the economy in the area is so small. For example, there is little chance of a teacher at a local school progressing to head of department, deputy head etc - it is more likely they move to another, more populated area in order to progress. Young teachers, especially probationers, tend not to stay in the area as the infrastructure is not available to keep them there.

Some of the biggest employers in the area are hospitality and tourism. The majority of this work is part-time, seasonal and undertaken by women. Opportunities for training, development and progression are extremely limited.

“One of the biggest issues in this area is that the job opportunities aren't there in the first place.”

Much of the *“decent and sustainable”* employment available is in male dominated areas such as construction and fish processing. Qinetiq, a company whose expertise lie in defence, aerospace and security, have a site in Kyle of Lochalsh.

“That’s where the skilled workforce tend to be, but by the nature of the work a lot of men are employed there. Progression here is quite slow moving.”

There have been positive changes in the area, with new job opportunities available. When young people leave the area to attend university, many are returning to take advantage of the careers prospects on offer.

“Technology is a key factor in keeping people in the area. Now you can be online and work from home instead of having to travel to an office.”

Childcare

The expansion of college courses to include a childcare qualification is welcomed. A key issue in providing childcare was the lack of workers for the few services which are available.

In rural areas it is *“just not viable”* to have nurseries for younger age children. Women need childcare. However, due to the geographical nature of the area it is not always possible for children to access the nursery places available. Statutory regulations often hinder children in rural areas from being able to undertake the free 3-5 years early education offered by the Government.

“Education is the way forward for so many people. The lack of childcare here really doesn't help that.”

Transport

As well as courses being limited, it can be very difficult to travel to access them. For example, if someone living in Kyle wants to take up a course at the centre in Portree, travelling will take a long time. This is particularly true if they are unable to drive and rely on public transport.

“We're more connected to Skye now because of the bridge. But there are still difficulties. You find yourself weighing up the cost of travelling to access education with the value you're going to get out of it.”

Local people have recently held meetings with the bus company which services the area. There is little provision for pram or wheelchair friendly buses. High costs as well as infrequent and poor public transport discourages women from studying at local colleges.

“They've spent all this money doing up the college. The building is great and it says to people ‘you're coming here because you're important’. Tatty old buses which do not come very often say the exact opposite.”

Young People

Many initiatives around education and training for young people are driven by what is happening or is required in the Central Belt. These may not necessarily be appropriate for rural areas.

One positive initiative is the partnership working between the college, Plockton High School and the National Trust to deliver a crofting course. This is a long-term idea which will not only teach young people traditional skills, but may also provide jobs in the local area. This important development focuses on practical and vocational learning. It is one of a number of initiatives in the area and is viewed as a positive way of engaging with young people whose talents do not lie in more academic subjects.

“One of the really good things about the course is that it has a good split between young men and young women.”

Have any changes to services, facilities and welfare benefits affected you, your family and your community as a whole?

Welfare Benefits

Changes to the welfare benefits system are having an adverse effect on the mental health of those who rely on benefits.

“Being asked to look for work when you know it won't be possible due to physical or mental illness, will cause a huge strain - not only on those claiming benefits but on their families and support networks.”

The so-called ‘bedroom tax’ will also have an impact in the area. Housing issues are similar to those in more urban areas of the country.

“There are just no smaller houses available here. There isn't enough social housing full stop.”

Families are often housed in accommodation that is larger than they require, simply because it is all that is available. These people will be forced to pay the bedroom tax through no fault of their own. Not enough one bedroom properties were built as it was more economical to build larger homes and *“there's a real backlash from that now.”* Many properties in the area could be ‘re-managed’ if there were more smaller homes available.

Anyone in receipt of benefits in Skye and Lochalsh has to travel to Portree for appointments etc. This can be very difficult for those who rely on public transport, which is limited and expensive. The Jobcentre Plus in Portree is not always open, which further restricts access.

“Government departments like the DWP don't have an awareness of rurality. Someone from round here was told they would have to go to Stornoway for an assessment because, according to them, it was the closest place on the map.”

Access to benefits is more restricted than in urban areas. For example, emergency payments do not work in more rural parts of the country, as the facilities which administer the money are not always open. Physical access due to a lack of transport and childcare is also problematic for women.

Older People and Caring

Home Care services have been moved and now come under the remit of the NHS, however adequate funding to support this has not been provided. Caring staff, the majority of whom are women, do not have enough hours in a working day to visit those who require their assistance. This has placed additional pressures on those who work in the care sector, as well as worry for the older people who rely on this *“vital service”*.

“My mother in law is 95 and only now needs a degree of home care. She has been told that there will be none available.”

The demographics of the area are more weighted to those aged 65 and over, however resources and facilities for this age group are dwindling. Day care services, for example, have been reduced and in some cases removed all together.

Local Services

Both Portree and Plockton High Schools have a swimming pool and a gym. Kyle has a community-run facility. There are no Council-run leisure facilities in the area.

“They’re all dependent on the community, apart from the high schools. It’s up to us to come together if we want anything.”

There is a strong sense of community in the area. Residents have the same expectations as those who live in the Central Belt, however they have to *“work harder in order to get things. We use the skills of the community to their fullest potential.”* Everything is done on a voluntary basis. Local people know that they will have to get involved if they want something - *“it’s been like this for so long.”*

The Citizens Advice Bureau provides advice and assistance to the community. The local service point, however, is losing a number of functions and a lot of services are no longer available.

“It’s more a case of we can’t do this rather than yes we can help. Marriages and library books is about all it’s good for .”

The service point cannot be contacted directly. Callers will be forwarded to a centre in Alness who will then transfer them onto their local facility. This is the case with most of the Highland Council services and can be very frustrating for those trying to make contact with local points.

Health

There is a large health centre in Kyle which provides a number of services including a GP and a dentist. The centre has good technological links with different hospitals, for example Raigmore in Inverness. The nearest hospital is in Broadford. A number of clinics are held there and consultants and specialists from other hospitals come to Skye to see patients. Certain health services, such as mental health support for children and young people, can only be accessed at the nearest large hospital in Inverness.

There is a maternity unit at the hospital in Broadford, where women can give birth, provided there are no complications with their pregnancy. If that were the case, women would have to travel to Inverness to have their baby.

“Women have to travel a significant distance in labour. It used to be that they were taken in before their due date but that’s not the case any more. It’s unlikely there will be any medical help on that journey, such as a midwife or an ambulance. The woman just has to get herself there.”

Local residents are currently being asked their opinions on proposals to create a single tier hospital on Skye, which would replace the two in Broadford and Portree. There are concerns that one *“all singing, all dancing”* facility would not serve the community as effectively as the current hospitals.

“Would one hospital lead to the sacrifice of services which we have available at the two facilities at the moment? We need more support for what is already available.”

The air ambulance service is considered to be “*very impressive*” by those who have used it. The helicopter is not, however, always able to take the partner or family member of the person being airlifted. They would have to make their own way to Inverness. This can be problematic if the person does not have a car.

Transport and Roads

There is no pavement in Breakish, a village on Skye approximately 7 miles away from Kyle of Lochalsh. The local community is running a campaign.

“Kids are coming off of the school bus and onto grass verges which have drops into ditches behind them. It’s just not safe.”

The Scottish Government is trying to encourage more children to cycle or walk to school, however in this area it would be extremely dangerous.

Public transport improvements in the area are vital. Bus services are not joined up, especially in winter. After coming off a ferry, there is often no bus available for an onward journey. This raises huge safety concerns for women.

Young people would benefit significantly from improved public transport.

“They get the school bus home and their independent social life stops after that. They have to rely on parents taking them to and from places which is not ideal, mainly because the cost of fuel is so high.”

Voluntary Services

Public sector funding cuts are having a significant impact on voluntary services around Skye and Lochalsh.

“We’re covering the gaps in terms of public sector funding”

Many resources are organised by unpaid volunteers, especially adult services. Those who deal with children and young people may be able to apply for financial support but often require of statutory funding in the first place.

Both the Better Together and Yes Scotland campaigns are setting out their vision for Scotland’s future.

What kind of Scotland do you want to see after the referendum vote?

“A fair Scotland”

There is not enough information being made available to the public in order to make an informed decision on the referendum. It seems to be that one side of the argument will say one thing and the other side will refute it, but without any concrete evidence.

There is also too much focus on what would happen if Scotland were to become an independent country. Politicians seem to forget that decisions still have to be made in the run-up to the vote.

It is hoped that the *“harder”* issues, which people at a grassroots level want to know about, will come to light.

Policies created at Holyrood and Westminster are not *“rural-proofed”*. Consideration of the impact of any decision made should automatically have a rural dimension, particularly given the size of remote and super sparse areas of Scotland.

“If they’re governing a country then they need to know all about that country”

Scotland should be an inclusive society, both socially and geographically. There is a perceived East/West Coast divide, whereby more money is allocated to the East Coast. This must be considered both in the run up to and after the vote.

There are concerns as to how 16 and 17 year olds, who have never voted in elections, will get a fair representation of the facts within schools. Teachers will have to be given additional resources and time to be able to discuss the referendum with pupils, which could place additional pressures on them.

“How do they inform teachers about politics to be able to pass that information onto kids who are in this position for the first time?”

The question on the ballot paper should be made available both in English and in Gaelic, given the number of Gaelic speakers in the country.

What one thing could improve your local area?

- Pavements in Breakish.
- Improved transport.
- Access to funding for voluntary organisations.
- Reduce isolation.
- Support for local voluntary organisations.

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.