The Scottish Women’s Convention held roundtable discussions throughout the North East of Scotland area between the 8th and the 12th of July, 2019 to discuss what matters to local women.

The unique geographical structure of the area throws up a variety of different issues for women as opposed to more urbanised localities throughout Scotland. As the largest local government area in the whole of the United Kingdom, this alone presents unique challenges for both residents and policy makers to overcome. Fundamentally, what came across most of all was the hard work and spirit that women contributed to their communities. Throughout the SWC’s time, women voiced both concerns and integrative solutions that can work to make the area the best place it can be for residents.

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 of all ages and backgrounds. 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.

6 Main Points from Highlands Roadshows:

- Shortage in provision of public transport in more rural areas
- Ongoing problems with Universal Credit and other forms of social security
- A lack of internet connectivity, most notably in more ruralised areas
- Inaccessibility to health services due to centralisation
- A rise in mental health issues with substantial referral waiting times for women and girls
- Challenges in recruitment of school teaching staff
Services and Community

The dispersed nature of the Highlands region means that it is the largest local government area in the U.K. Whilst it enjoys one of the highest rate of third sector services in the country, cuts have affected women locally. Services which women have made use of are now often staffed by unpaid volunteers who give what time they can. This is compounded by lengthy waiting lists for certain services.

Women reported that:

- Such a wide spread area means that many organisations—most particularly smaller ones with less funding—may have difficulty reaching their full potential, perform maximum outreach and work collaboratively with other partners.
- New ways of working on service user engagement and “radical solutions” for organisations to link up with one another to help communities are needed.
- Brexit and it’s implications for funding issues, particularly on health and education are a real threat.
- Partnership working with speedy access to a range of services for the most vulnerable in society to ensure joined up help is crucial.
- Making use of Third Sector Interface meetings to encourage collaborative working was thought to be an encouraging way forward, and getting more organisations involved in this would be beneficial.

“We really do require local and specialist knowledge of different areas due to the set up.”

“In the Highland region, there is an overlap of multiple services and this doesn’t always work efficiently.”

Key Recommendations:

- Community engagement and improvement to communications for women.
- Encouraging real women’s voices within localities, including expanding the scope for engagement with individuals.
- Funding for wraparound services which can work collaboratively together both physically and digitally.
- Local hubs where people have access to services that they need in rural areas.

Housing

Housing is a major issue within the North West of Scotland. Whilst there has been an increase in the build of affordable homes for social rent, it is feared that rising house prices coupled with high costs of living has the potential to push women and their families into poverty.

Comments included:

- Worries that the building of new homes tends to focus on more populated areas at the expense of others, meaning many women may have to leave behind local connections in order to gain suitable accommodation.
Given the relatively small population in many parts of the region, a number of schools offer education from primary to secondary age. Recruitment of teachers, including those for Additional Support Needs, was voiced as a major issue for children reaching their full potential.

Women’s comments included:

- Mixed reviews on the approach of joined up schooling from ages of 3-18. Some praised this as a great initiative for collaboration and sharing of best practice. Others, however pointed to this as showing the severe shortage of teachers.
- Significant barriers to teacher recruitment include projected decreases in the working age population and young people leaving the area.
- Many children are having subjects cut and are taking less as a result, possibly harming chances of Higher Education entrance.
- Strong emphasis is placed on University Higher Education at the detriment of other forms, such as college placements and Modern Apprenticeships.
- That there needs to be more initiatives to encourage young people to stay locally
- More must be done to increase young girls uptake in STEM and other stereotypically “male” job roles.

Key Recommendations:

- Utilisation of council tenant organisations.
- Radical use of empty homes and spare land for development need to be explored and use women’s experience for such endeavours.
- Ensuring homes are fit for purpose including with disability access.
- Collaborative solutions for housing and social care services coming together.

EDUCATION

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Delivering advice and guidance on matters linked to the PSE curriculum is crucial but some women reported that access is sometimes denied to providers of this, with programmes not being adhered to. A number of issues that are in danger of being overlooked in the PSE curriculum include:

- LGBT+ education
- Sexual awareness and consent
- Violence against Women and Girls

**Key Recommendations:**

- Ensure electronic communication systems and other forms of technology are utilised to provide a collaborative approach to learning.
- Encourage bursaries for student teachers in the Highlands for subjects with less staff.
- Promotion of work experience placements and entrepreneurship programmes aimed at young women.
- More information around sexual violence, consent and pornography.
- More outreach for children from deprived communities.

**Health and Social Care**

**MENTAL HEALTH**

Mental health is a problem for women of all ages. Women gave much feedback focusing on themes covering stigma and the rise in service demand. Notable comments included:

- Many women feeling unable to reach out for support.
- Fears over a lack of anonymity in small communities.
- Recruitment problems in Community Psychiatric Nurses, leading to high workloads for staff members as well as long waiting times.
- Many staff leaving or retiring with no one there to fill gaps left in recruitment.
- A lack of counselling for people suffering from mental health issues with this seen as “non-existent” in certain areas.
- The increase in demand on mental health services means that waiting times can be extremely lengthy, often much higher than the Scottish average.
- Suicide and self-harm are prevalent problems which are on the rise.
- There is not enough support from employers in helping staff cope with mental health issues.

“There is always that stigma issue which puts women off seeking support as they are worried how they will be seen in asking for help.”
CENTRALISATION OF MEDICAL CARE

Many women spoke to pressed the topic of centralisation of both medical and emergency services for those in local communities. Comments included:

- A concentration of medical services to Raigmore Hospital in Inverness.
- Cuts to local services leading to longer waiting times and lengthy travel distances for many women who stay further away.
- Lengthy travel to hospital even in an ambulances, which may be restricted due to road blockages with some patients having to be helicoptered in certain circumstances.
- Many medical services which were originally consultant-led have since been downgraded due to a reduction in resources.
- The centralisation of emergency services to Glasgow means a loss of local knowledge of the area, which may impede emergency medical services getting to patients as soon as possible.
- The shortage of NHS staff with major obstacles to recruitment such as encouraging potential employees to uproot themselves and their families to a new location.
- Appointments for routine examinations such as smear tests may sometimes take months to obtain, with potentially real and serious implications for women, depending on the services available locally.

“Access to medical help is extremely worrying”

Case Study: Maternity Service Access:

Increasing numbers of women from the outermost reaches of the area often have to travel to Raigmore Hospital to give birth, potentially leaving older children and families behind. A number of individuals noted that, depending on how close a woman is to her due date, she may even stay in a hotel within Inverness, leading to financial implications and isolation from her family.

INCREASE IN DRUG USE

There is often a stereotypical perception that drug use is not as prevalent in more ruralised areas, despite heightened usage being voiced as a key problem. Many women’s comments included:

- Failure to recognise the connection between mental health and addiction issues.
- That addiction should be treated with a health and social care approach, as opposed to a criminal justice matter.
- That the cycle of addiction needs to be better understood and the impact that this has on people and their families.
- The issue of “hidden” drug use.
- Failure to tackle the root causes of addiction.

“There’s that perception of drug users which is just not true at all. In a lot of cases, people are still functioning normally to those on the outside who don’t know what’s really going on.”
EMPLOYMENT, SOCIAL SECURITY AND POVERTY

CURRENT EMPLOYMENT

Often focusing around the tourist industry, work for many women was seen as low paid, seasonal and featuring insecure or zero hours contracts. Numerous women noted:

- Jobs can be “patchy and inconsistent” in terms of their structure and are geared towards seasonal working.
- For many women, holding down multiple jobs is not uncommon.
- The need for car ownership due to irregular public transport for daily commuting has the potential to push many more women into poverty.

COST OF LIVING

A number of women pointed to problems with welfare reform, low, insecure wages and the high cost of living driven by little competition and high tourism. Comments were based around:

- The rising number of food banks with arrangements in some places to deliver food parcels to more rural locations with the cost of food an ongoing problem.
- The stigma still attached to using resources such as food banks for those who cannot afford to buy necessities.
- One single shop for locals in many small towns and villages, which is more expensive due to no competition.
- A reliance on supermarket deliveries where they are available, however, these can be inconsistent and dependent on the likes of internet access and connection.

Key Recommendations:

- Services to link up and collaborate more effectively, including a coordination of resources for addiction issues.
- Funding for public events with a focus on mental health.
- Strategies to tackle under staffing.
- Heightened awareness and education around mental health.
- Further knowledge on mental health problems and where to go for help, including a focus on preventative and early intervention solutions.
- Community-led discussions to seek solutions to the current centralisation of services and to highlight these at a national level.
- Encouraging uptake and recruitment of Community Link Workers, particularly with a view to reducing health inequalities.
Social Security

Delays in Universal Credit (UC) was raised as having a huge impact on many women and their families due to the 6 week waiting period, this can lead to rent arrears, poverty and families incurring high interest debt. Comments from women around the area included:

- That those who are in receipt of UC and other forms of social security tend to be in work, reflecting the summation of modern casual workforces with low pay.
- Many women exiting prison face severe poverty with vulnerable support needs whilst facing obstacles and delays to social security.
- That the social security system has the potential to push women into homelessness and exploitation due to the pressure it puts on them.

Case Study: Local Food Initiatives:

To address high prices and wastage, many local initiatives and community based organisations are introducing life skills such as cookery classes. Other projects include teaching school children how to plant and grow vegetables by local farmers and Community Centres receiving food provision from local supermarkets.

Case Study: Universal Credit Roll Out

Inverness was one of the first places in the United Kingdom to experience the roll out of UC in 2013, being used as a “guinea pig”. Having to pay rent directly to Landlords as opposed to the previous system under Housing Benefit is a problem for a number of claimants. Debts incurred during the waiting period take priority for payment. This results in eviction notices being sent out to some of the most vulnerable clients. Whilst the new UC Scottish Choices are now available where rent is paid directly to a landlord, this does not solve the problem of delayed payments. This not only puts pressure on clients, who may have mental health issues, but also on social workers and other organisations trying to provide assistance. Many of those working for these organisations noted the increase in claimants seeking advice and aid.

Key Recommendations:

- Funding for local initiatives in communities to encourage uptake of food and eliminate waste.
- Government drives aimed at the private sector to encourage investment in local communities.
- Procurement to take into account factors such as payment of the living wage, gender pay gaps and precarious contracts when outsourcing services.
- More local knowledge around other sources of social security such as free school meals and grants for women and their families.
TRANSPORT AND POLICING

TRANSPORT

Public transport continues to impose difficulties on women’s lives, including employment, education and social security. Buses which join up local towns and villages rather than just providing services to Inverness are seen to be the most unstable. Many noted that:

- Transport is often either not on time, or not running at all in rural areas of the region.
- Buses can just “turn up when they like” leading to difficulties for women.
- The unsuitability of many buses for disabled passenger’s access.
- Car parking is a major problem in Inverness.

“This needs to be looked at by authorities as people in rural areas who do not have cars and elderly people rely on buses to get them to hospital appointments and do food shopping.”

POLICING

Cuts to police resources was felt to be an issue, with many local women seeing the police force as stretched amongst communities. Feedback included:

- A shortage of policing with many local stations now unmanned
- Oftentimes, there is only one police car available to cover large areas of the region.
- Volunteers as opposed to fully employed officers within many localities.

“We need an active police unit that’s joined up, there’s too much pressure with them trying to cover large distances.”

Key Recommendations:

- Community stakeholder meetings and public consultations to ensure the best use of public transport.
- Local scoping exercises to understand if utilisation of transport in community ownership could benefit rural areas better.
- An increase in community bus services.
- Consultation with local communities into crime in their areas and best use of police resources.
What are the key priorities for women in your local area?

- Education and Social Services.
- Better information for those who have no online access.
- Engagement with communities to make better use of grants and funding.
- More advertisement of local meetings.
- Communication around events to help within local areas.
- Integration and partnership plans around shopping, especially for food.
- Stopping the centralisation of medical services and opening up more local places for help.
- Making speeding and road safety a priority.
- Cuts in NHS and education, especially around mental health.
- Better solutions for climate change.
- Reduction of fuel poverty in villages.
- Greater political representation for women.
- Provision for car parking to be much better.

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.

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