

THE SCOTTISH WOMEN'S CONVENTION

SPRING
2020
DIGITAL
ROADSHOWS

REPORT

Northern Isles

Thursday 14th 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.

The Northern Isles of Shetland and Orkney are uniquely positioned in terms of the geographical lay out of Scotland. Both are key tourist destinations and are heavily reliant on this as a major factor of the local economy. The distance from the mainland means the Northern Isles have often been viewed as a getaway for many individuals. However, this also means challenges around the transport of goods and services to the Islands. It is particularly acute in less habited areas and where broadband connectivity can be an issue for some.



Key Points

- Worries over funding, post-lockdown, for services desperately needed for women.
- The increase in mental health issues both currently and in the future.
- Lack of appropriate fitting PPE for many women key workers.
- Fears over the shutdown of retail and hospitality industries and what this will mean for women's employment and incomes.
- Accessible, affordable and reliable technology is essential for those working from home and undertaking home schooling.
- The social care sector urgently needs investment and workers need to be valued.

Covid-19 and the Community

Local communities throughout the Islands were praised for the responses to the pandemic. Community councils have come together and applied for funding where available in order to provide a localised and coordinated effort that seeks to help the most vulnerable. Community-led organisations are appropriately placed to develop a response that suits the individual needs of Island communities. Women on the ground are seen in organising roles and being proactive in identifying what is needed at local levels.

“Our community is really good; you can put on Facebook if you need something and people you don’t even know will drop it at your door...that’s how good it is.”

“I feel good that our community is looking after people and that help will be there if I need it.”

Service Users

Third sector organisations and their service users are feeling the impact of the current situation.

- Fears over what the post-lockdown landscape will look. Women seeking help for complex needs (eg physical or mental health illnesses) may increase due to the ongoing impacts of COVID.
- Concerns where progress had been made with women service users working through trauma recovery. Current lockdown restrictions may act as triggers, particularly regarding feelings of entrapment and isolation.
- An increase in the numbers of individuals reporting to certain services with greater complexity of issues and needs. Workers, with already high case loads, are seeing a rising demand in work.
- Funding awarded can often have conditions attached which do not take into account the difficulties faced within particular communities. Grants, accompanied by advice as to how and when money should be spent, do not take account the needs of the community and particular services.
- Many women and survivors are not making contacting services due to a lack of privacy. This means that services may be overwhelmed when restrictions are lifted and will be unable to cope.
- Worries over the removal of face to face support and what this means for service users. A lack of online communications and safe spaces for discussions have led to many women with no contact to support services.
- Current service users may have additional needs brought on by the current situation. Waiting lists will have to be extended, contributing to an already strained service

“Everybody seems to be putting money into what’s happening right now and not really considering what will happen after this. Things are going to get worse and I’m not sure the Government is recognising that yet.”

“There are women in very difficult situations who cannot access services. There will be a lot who will be at breaking point by the time this is lifted.”

“What we really need is funding for annual salaries to make sure we have staff available for during this and when this is over. We can’t do anymore until we have more people. Funding coming in has to be spent right now. That could be going towards a year’s salary to deal with trauma and recovery.”

Community Safety

The current situation is not unusual for many who already self-isolate due to a number of triggers they may feel in social situations. This is due to previous trauma. A false perception can sometimes be held by those who do not live within Island communities that they are much safer than the mainland. The same problems exist, however, as everywhere else.

Women feel more comfortable out with the home environment at present. This is due to a lack of men around and with pub closures meaning less harassment.

“For some within the community, there is a feeling that because of the amount of time already spent at home, confinement is quite normal in their day to day life. We have been using it as an example to make people understand what the fall out from sexual violence is like and that it really inhibits your freedom of movement. If we think we are stressed, this is what a lot of survivors feel all the time.”

Geographical Layout

For many of the smaller islands, there have been no cases of Covid-19. However, this does not stop fears that people on the mainland do not understand how fragile this situation can be. For instance, if only a handful of people were to become infected, it may be a significant proportion of the population. This, in turn, can take a toll on how the whole community works. When easing restrictions on movement, these issues must be taken in to account. These communities must be protected from tourists.

A lack of tourism, however, will have a detrimental impact on the retail and hospitality sectors where women dominate. Many workers are currently furloughed or may work on seasonal contracts. They are unsure how this will affect their income over the Summer season.

“We need to place more value on our essential workers in shops and in retail. This has highlighted how valuable they truly are.”

NHS

As elsewhere in Scotland, hospitals and health centres on the Isles were making preparations for a huge increase in people needing hospital treatment as a result of the pandemic. This did not happen. There has been a decrease in hospital referrals and access to A&E. This has led to concerns that problems are not being reported for fear of contracting COVID.

The postponement of routine breast cancer and cervical screenings may lead to further problems in years to come. If screening, or other routine testing, does not take place it could lead to an increase in other serious illnesses and hospital admissions.

“A wait of two months for screening can make a huge difference if there is a cancerous condition that needs to be treated. There is going to be a real crisis in cancer and other related illnesses coming up next year. We need to limit that as much as possible.”

Personal Protective Equipment (PPE)

PPE is an issue for many working within different sectors. One of the major issues is that the vast majority of PPE is labelled as “unisex” – another name for large male measurements. This incorrectly fitting equipment can pose a real risk to women essential workers.

Access to PPE can still be extremely problematic. There is also the added issue of delivery to the Outer Isles. This can often lead to delays when equipment is crucially needed.

There has been positive community activity and volunteering to make protective equipment at home for health and social care workers. It’s *“amazing to see the response”* that so many have taken on to this issue, but it was still felt that it was shocking that this was needed.

“Properly fitting PPE is vital. I worked for home care for a number of years and certainly it was difficult to find small size gloves. They do tend to just assume one size fits all, but these can slip off. Social care, for instance, can be majorly impacted where the vast number working in this sector is female.”

Social Care

Social care providers are major employers in the Islands with most of the key workers being women. The pandemic, however, has shown that the sector is understaffed. These are hard jobs which are now being recognised as invaluable.

Acknowledgement of the work undertaken by homecare workers must be given. These women provide personal care to meet individual needs. This service is provided by the local authority, which is different to most areas within Scotland.

“People have to be flexible, adapt and be hygienic and considerate. It is an incredibly difficult job. I’m just glad people are beginning to realise just how important this is. These workers should be rewarded. Hopefully, this will be a wakeup call.”

“It shouldn’t have taken a pandemic for social care workers to get a wage rise. The Government really need to look at this sector and how we treat our elderly.”

Mental Health

Services regarding mental health have been an ongoing problem within Island communities for a number of years. Supply has struggled to cope with rising demand. This has been further highlighted by what the present situation means for mental ill health and has the potential to mean in future.

Cuts to funding have led to certain services having to stop. There is not the capacity to cope with signposting service users to other providers of support. The current situation will result in an additional increase in demand for mental health facilities. Women are struggling to cope with juggling work, home schooling and care. Certain services provide additional support for women and children. Additional waiting times, however, are causing further setbacks for service users.

There is a current oversubscription of public as well as private counselling services. There is not enough provision to meet demand.

The current restrictions on fact to face support is having a knock on affect with women not engaging with services. There is real concern that those who drop out of seeking support will relapse into addition. Many who cannot reach out for help will see their mental health issues mix with fear and anxieties around the current situation.

“If there was ever a time that people will rely on addiction as a crutch, it is now.”

“There are not enough mental health services to cope with the need.”

“Unfortunately, for many people feeling low, that is when they will struggle to video chat and be on camera. It’s the idea of physical contact that people need.”

Broadband

Connectivity within Island communities has been an issue for a number of years. Despite some improvements and investment into infrastructure, it is still far from ideal for many. The current situation has exacerbated this and highlighted the lack of a coordinated approach across the Islands in terms of connectivity.

The lower bandwidth in some parts of the Islands has become a pressing matter where online activity has seen a sharp rise. Other island users rely on satellite connectivity. Masts are sparse and there are continued delays with repairs. This can make home working and access to information difficult.

Homeworking in teams can prove difficult when staff are in different locations. It can also be hard to contact vulnerable service users and work effectively with them.

For those with children who are home schooled, a lack of connectivity and resources can result in students not being able to complete tasks.

Women can be vulnerable with poor digital signals. For example, there is a risk to women’s safety if they are stranded and cannot use a mobile phone to call for help.

“The infrastructure just isn’t there. Where there is fibre broadband, it’s sometimes only one small pocket of the island but it looks like the whole place has it.”

Women and Inequality Within the Covid-19 Response

Expectations on women were seen to be “*tremendous*” at this moment in time. Whilst this is nothing new, the combination of juggling so many different pressures was seen to be taking a major toll on many. There is also a complete lack of wellbeing measures for those working from home.

There needs to be a major societal understanding of what women can reasonably achieve during this time. Where women have partners, the burden of caring still tends to fall on themselves, despite them doing just as much home working. There is pressure to do more around the home, work and juggling childcare. This leads to increased anxiety and stress.

Home schooling is daunting and places pressure on mothers who are not teachers. With older children, many feel less qualified to help and worry about their children’s future outcomes.

Home schooling was seen as daunting. It places pressure on mothers who are not teachers and is exacerbated where children may be older. Many women feel less qualified to help as well as worrying about children’s future outcomes.

“Trying to balance daily work with childcare is just so stressful.”

“The percentage of the population that are not stressed must be tiny.”

Post-Lockdown

Women felt more secure living in Scotland where returning to work was seen as still not the right option for many for fear of a second spike in infections.

A few reflected on the fear of coming out of lockdown now and what the effect will be of “the new normal” and measures brought in. Policy appears to be focussed on the economy, rather than wellbeing. This may intensify within a few months with the ongoing contraction of the economy.

“We don’t know what the landscape is going to look like. It doesn’t feel like there is a contingency plan looking ahead.”

“We saw Covid-19 coming and nobody seems to have taken it seriously, it was underestimated.”

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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