



Paisley 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 Wynd Centre in Paisley on Wednesday 19th September 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.**

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?

Childcare

There is a lack of accessible, affordable childcare in the area. Working mothers and lone parents in particular struggle to juggle work and childcare. Many are forced to rely on friends and family to look after their children, especially during the school holidays.

Childcare places for children with learning disabilities are also scarce.

“Childcare students should be given more training on how to work with these kids”

Not enough value is placed upon the role of early years practitioners, the majority of whom are women.

“Plumbers are paid more than childcare workers. Why are pipes more important than our children?”

Education

Places within schools for children with Special Educational Needs are diminishing.

“There are a lot of kids who have to rely on the support of classroom assistants because they don't have specialist help. This puts additional pressure on the assistants and means the children aren't getting all of the support they require.”

Not all of the secondary schools in Renfrewshire offer the same courses, meaning some pupils have to travel to other schools to access certain subjects. In the past, the Council funded taxis which transported pupils, however funding for this has been taken away. Students now have to rely on public transport which they have to fund themselves and is not always available to certain schools.

“My child agreed to study a specific subject at another school on the basis a taxi would be provided. It seems pointless now.”

Health

Funding is constantly constrained within the NHS. As a result workers, the majority of whom are women, are faced with increased workloads as there are not enough finances to recruit more staff.

“It’s just getting worse and worse.”

The Children’s Ward at the Royal Alexandra Hospital in Paisley has been earmarked for closure as a result of funding cuts. If this proposal is carried forward, families throughout Renfrewshire will have to travel to Yorkhill Hospital in Glasgow with sick children. This is a difficult journey for those who rely on public transport.

More awareness and information regarding mental health issues is necessary in the Paisley area.

“I don’t feel there is enough help and support both for those who suffer mental health issues and their families.”

Services

“The loss of a number of services in the area has had a huge impact”.

Day care centres for the elderly, youth clubs etc are disappearing throughout Renfrewshire.

“The needs of service users are not a priority.”

Women predominate in the voluntary sector and reductions in funding can mean jobs are cut and in some cases removed altogether.

“It tends to be women who suffer the worse effects of cuts to services, both as service users and service providers.”

Services for young people have been subject to severe restraints and changes. Previously a fund was set up through the Local Authority which assisted young people with getting into work and writing a CV, as well as courses to boost skills and confidence. Funding was removed approximately two years ago.

“This service was so important to help and encourage young people back into work.”

More support is also required for older people who have been made redundant. While the focus on young people is important, those who have worked for a number of years and have lost their jobs also require support to get back into the labour market.

Benefits and Welfare Reform

Claiming welfare benefits and dealing with the Jobcentre and other agencies associated with the process can be extremely stressful.

“You’re demoralised enough as it is, often because you’re suffering from ill health. It’s an added struggle to have to deal with all these different people.”

The stress of looking for a job is described as “*horrendous*”, especially as there are few vacant positions in the current economic climate. Agency work is available because it is cost effective for businesses. It is not, however often suitable for women due to unreliable and in many cases anti-social hours. Accessing affordable childcare to cover this type of work is very difficult.

The Work Capability Assessment carried out by ATOS was heavily criticised.

“It’s totally humiliating. You’re sitting at the mercy of an interviewer completely. It’s up to them whether they think you’re fit to work or not. The whole system is just demeaning.”

In the past, accessing the Jobcentre was easy as it was a ‘one stop shop’ where claimants could see all of the necessary advisors. Changes to the systems used by staff means that this is no longer the case. Claimants now have to phone a variety of different telephone numbers as well as visiting the Jobcentre. Not all of these numbers are free.

“If you phone from the Jobcentre you don’t have to pay but that’s assuming everyone can get there.”

There is also additional pressure on Jobcentre staff, who “*don’t know if they’re coming or going*”. Advisors only have a short period of time with claimants and have to follow a specified script of answers.

“Their hands are tied in many cases. It’s the system rather than the people.”

Changes brought about by the UK Coalition Government’s Welfare Reform Act 2012 will have a significant impact on women. From April 2013, benefits will be applied for and administered in a different way than they are at present.

Claimants will have to apply for Universal Credit (UC) and Personal Independence Payment (PIP) online. Not all women have access to the internet and many lack the skills and confidence to use a computer. Concern was expressed by those forced to use libraries, internet cafes etc to complete their applications. There is a complete lack of privacy in these places.

“I don’t want my confidential information lying all about the library for everyone to see”

UC will be paid as one payment, every four weeks, in arrears. The equivalent benefit is currently paid weekly. Women will have to completely change the way they budget for their households as a result.

Housing benefit, for example, is paid directly to the landlord on a weekly basis, however under the new system it will be paid directly to the claimant every four weeks. There is a real danger that benefits may not be spent in the way they are at the moment, as many women will never have had such a substantial sum of money at the one time.

This change to income may result in increased debt as women will have to re-think their household income and payments. Many will be forced to rely on ‘pay day loans’ and short-term lenders which charge “*astronomical*” interest rates.

Services to support benefit claimants, such as the Citizens Advice Bureau and Advice Works, do not have enough staff in order to assist individuals in making applications. There is also a huge backlog of appeals from those who have been refused benefits, which places additional pressure on support staff.

“For both staff and people on benefits, appeals processes are becoming more and more traumatic to endure.”

It is important that more information is available to those who will be affected by changes to Welfare Benefits. At the moment there is a lot of scaremongering and women are concerned they will not have enough money to feed their children, run their homes, pay for childcare etc.

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

Women and Children First support women who have suffered domestic and sexual abuse. There is also Renfrewshire Women's Aid and Renfrewshire Women's Association, an organisation which works to raise awareness of issues around domestic abuse.

There is now a Women and Children's Unit within the police which has been well received by those who have had to use it.

"Attitudes seem to be changing because of this Unit. It's worked really well."

Younger police officers seem to be more aware of domestic abuse issues. Schools, in partnership with other agencies, need to provide support and education to pupils as to the differences between healthy and unhealthy relationships.

Women who have experienced domestic abuse, sexual assault, rape etc require better guidance in court.

"Women need to understand and be aware of the system that's there to support them."

There is no dedicated Domestic Abuse Court in Renfrewshire. This facility should be rolled out across all Local Authority areas. There are not enough solicitors in and around Paisley who specialise in domestic abuse.

"It's often more about the lawyer making money than getting the woman the best possible result."

Women in prison are seen to be more harshly punished than men, with the majority being sentenced for minor crimes such as non-payment of fines. Cornton Vale has a "revolving door" due to the real lack of support for those exiting prison. Most of the women who are imprisoned have mental health and drug and alcohol misuse issues.

"My friend worked as a prison councillor and only had ten minutes with each inmate. She told her bosses this was not enough time because these women needed professional help. The prison did not have the time or resources to facilitate any longer with a prisoner. She eventually left her job as she felt it was pointless."

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, not enough information is available in the public domain in order for people to make an informed decision. Some do not even understand what the referendum means. There is a danger that if details are not given, then many women will not vote at all.

Specific questions are not being answered.

"It's all quite confusing and the politicians aren't giving straight answers. Specific information is definitely lacking."

How Scotland would cope financially, the future of the armed forces, EU membership and nuclear weapons are just some of the questions that need to be answered. Issues such as who a Scottish person would pay tax to if they are employed by an English company are also unclear.

"Information should be put out to the public in every way possible."

Leaflets are a good idea however not everyone would read something that was put through their door. TV debate is also important but must be impartial.

It is often taken for granted that people have internet access and will be able to read all about the referendum online.

“This cuts out an enormous amount of people straight away”

Although there are places which offer free access to the internet, such as local libraries, those who do not know how to use a computer are still at a disadvantage. It is therefore vital that impartial and independent information is available in a variety of formats.

“I don’t want party politics . I just want to know the full details.”

Many women do not have confidence in their elected representatives and feel they are not in touch with the real world. This could discourage a number from voting in the referendum.

“MPs and MSPs should have to do a sort of ‘community service’ where they do voluntary work in the areas they represent. This would make them much more accountable.”

Allowing both the ‘yes’ and ‘no’ campaigns to use a local community hub or town hall for a week would be a good way of getting details out to the public. Members of the community could drop in and out, at times similar to the opening hours of a polling station, to ask questions and gain more information.

“Things have to be local and geared towards how the result of the referendum will effect people in their own communities. If it’s not local, people won’t go.”

More should be done to educate young people about voting in general but also specifically what the referendum means for Scotland. This is particularly true for young people who will be eligible to vote in the autumn of 2014.

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

- Paisley town centre is a *“sad place”*, with local shops and businesses suffering as a result of shopping centres such as Braehead and Silverburn opening nearby. Business rates should be lowered to encourage more people to open shops etc along the High Street.
- More affordable, nice places to eat would encourage more people to spend money in the town.
- Rubbish bins are not emptied enough and overflow. Litter laws need to be implemented more strictly.
- *“The Council need to look at the way they spend money.”* Johnstone swimming pool, which was in the centre of town, was closed in the summer and a pool has been opened at the new ‘sports hub’ located at Johnstone High School. Public transport to the new facility is very limited and the hub is closed during the day while it is used by the school.
- When new housing estates are built, amenities must be built for residents. Lack of shops, schools and transport often leads to families leaving these areas.
- There is very little entertainment in Paisley, particularly in certain communities. Little investment has been made in areas like Ferguslie, where the new St Mirren FC football stadium has been built. *“There’s a lot of ground but nobody is building on it.”*
- Most of the entertainment available for families is expensive. The ‘Big Adventure’ play centre in Linwood and the Lagoon Sports Centre in Paisley are good facilities but are costly.

- Public transport in the area needs to be improved. The Arriva bus company has recently been taken over by McGills.
“The buses have had their timetables changed and it’s all a bit of a shambles. Paisley really needs a bus station in the town centre.”
- Transport links throughout the town need to be reviewed - for example travelling from Ferguslie to Glenburn involves taking two separate buses, whereas it would be approximately a fifteen minute journey in a car.



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.

Scottish Women’s Convention is a charitable company limited by guarantee. Registered in Scotland No. SC0327308. Registered office 2nd Floor, 333 Woodlands Road, Glasgow G3 6NG. The Scottish Women’s Convention is a Charity registered in Scotland No. SC039852.