



# Peterhead 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 Palace Hotel in Peterhead on Friday 15th June 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.**
- **Event evaluation forms completed by participants.**



**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?**

### **Welfare Reform**

The introduction of Universal Credit under the new Welfare Reform Act will bring about significant changes to a number of benefits. Working hours thresholds for tax credit entitlements are increasing. Single people with children will have to work at least 16 hours per week. For couples, joint working hours will need to be at least 24 a week, with one person working at least 16 hours a week. In a couple where only one person is employed, at least 24 hours a week will have to be worked

This change in policy will have a detrimental impact on women for a number of reasons. Cuts to public services, where women make up the majority of the workforce, are taking jobs away from areas such as Peterhead. Employers may not be able to increase working hours in order for women to qualify for assistance from tax credits, which is heavily relied upon by many families.

For those who are fortunate enough to be given extra hours, further childcare costs will be incurred. As of April 2011, the childcare element of tax credits was reduced from covering 80% of childcare costs to covering 70%.

*“Women are losing out either way with these changes.”*

Applications for Universal Credit, when it comes into force over the period 2013-2017, must be completed online. The requirement to submit complex forms in this way is causing genuine concern amongst women. Services supporting claimants to complete benefit applications note that approximately 70% of their users are women with no access to the internet. Those who do not own a computer currently use public libraries, which are being closed or hours reduced due to public service cuts, or internet access points. As these are open spaces, any personal information may be seen by other users.

Some women do not have the skills or support to use a computer. While there are certain training courses available, a lack of confidence from being *“so far removed from education”* stops women from accessing them.

More awareness of impending changes to housing benefit and the financial impact these will have is required. The proposed ‘bedroom tax’ is causing concern. The amount of housing benefit a person receives may be cut if they are deemed to have a ‘spare’ bedroom in their council or housing association house. No consideration has been made for those who require a room for an overnight carer or a child staying with a parent who is not their primary carer.

Overall the changes to welfare benefit and tax credit systems will have a fundamental impact on women’s finances. More information is required to inform individuals as to what these adjustments will mean in real terms.

*“The Government are historically guilty of not informing people about changes to systems. Too many people are unaware of the effects until a crisis point is reached.”*

## **Voluntary Services**

There is a growing reliance on volunteers to deliver a number of services. This practice is heavily criticised.

*“Volunteers should never be made to do a paid persons role.”*

These services are *“essential”* to those who use them.

## **Community Services.**

Cuts to community education throughout Aberdeenshire are affecting vulnerable children and families. Children 1st in Fraserburgh, for example, provide support to young mothers with substance misuse issues. Of 28 service users, 25 are now considered “stable”, only after years of mutual trust between them and service providers. This service is being withdrawn due to lack of funding with only the three most vulnerable women being referred to social services. The rest of the women, who gained so much from being part of this programme, will be left without their primary support network.

Rural communities do not want to feel any less safe as the single police force is established. Funding may be focused on more populated areas, particularly in the Central Belt, resulting in a detrimental impact on rural areas. There needs to be a fair distribution of resources to ensure all communities feel protected. The Community Wardens initiative is strongly supported in the local area.

*“Their presence is having a really positive effect”*

## Transport

Public transport in the area is very expensive. A single journey from Peterhead to Aberdeen costs £10. Buses operate on a half-hourly basis during the week with an hourly service on a Sunday. The cost of fares and restricted timetabling means a job in Aberdeen, for those without private transport, is “*out of the question*”.

*“If you’re on minimum wage then you’re working three hours a day just to get to and from work.”*

Cars are a necessity in rural areas. Those forced to rely on public transport are unable to access many essential services. For example, rural GP surgeries used to dispense medication however this practice has stopped. Patients now travel to neighbouring towns in order to obtain the necessary medication. Local services are not available, resulting in those without private transport incurring increased travel costs and time.

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

*“There are not enough support services for women who are released from prison.”*

More exit support is needed for women in terms of rehabilitation and community re-integration when leaving prison.

Women are considered to be sentenced much more harshly than men. Handing down custodial sentences in HMP Cornton Vale forces women away from family and support networks. This is not in the long term interest of the women, their families or society as a whole.

*“Sentencing women to a prison term for minor criminal offences is a vicious circle and a completely pointless exercise.”*

The majority of women in the prison system come from troubled backgrounds. Intervention and community orders would be more effective in turning their lives around.

The new HMP Grampian, currently being built on the site of HMP Peterhead, will have a women’s unit. This will replace the one currently in existence at HMP Craiginches, Aberdeen, which will close when the new prison opens in 2013-14. For those living around Aberdeenshire, the location of the new facility will be difficult to access for visiting prisoners. Greater travel costs and time will be incurred.

There is still a degree of stigma attached to women who have suffered violence in a relationship. Current cultural norms are seen to sexualise young women. More education is necessary at school level, for both sexes, around these issues.

**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?**

*“The public are lamentably ill informed.”*

There is a lack of information available to the public regarding the impact of the referendum. Questions need to be answered regarding ‘real term’ scenarios, particularly the financial implications of any decision on Scotland’s future. Further clarity is also sought around membership of the European Union, finance, the Armed Forces and nuclear weapons.

The media must not be relied upon as the main source of information as reporting can often be biased. Every medium possible must be used to get facts into the public domain. It must be presented in a clear and readable format with no jargon.

*“Is there actually any real information out there so far?”*

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

- Peterhead town centre needs to be cleaned up. *“It’s unattractive and has very little positivity about it.”*
- Promotion of the town and surrounding areas as tourist destinations.
- Infrastructure is required to support quality accommodation or attractions.
- Business investment should be sought to regenerate the area.

### **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.