

Shetland Roadshow Report

**Mental
Health**

Childcare

**Low
Paid**

Disability

Work

**Social
Security**

**Public
Services**

Caring

**Equal
Pay**

Schools

**Welfare
Reform**

Friday 17th May 2019

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Introduction

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC) travelled to the Shetland Islands in order to garner women's experiences about crucial issues at both a local and national level.

Women continue to face inequality throughout Scotland for a number of reasons. Due to the unique geographical makeup of the Shetland Islands, taking a one size fits all approach does not address the challenges women face from both a geographic and historical perspective. Policy makers should be aware of both the structural and societal issues that impact on women's inequality by incorporating their views and experiences. The immeasurable ways in which women engage and participate within the communities on the Shetland Islands cannot be underestimated. The likes of higher living costs than the mainland, accessibility of services and problems with Universal Credit are key issues which affect the Island areas in a way that is acutely different to other areas of Scotland.

When shaping policy within the decision making process for the Islands, priority should always be given to the women's voices who make these communities and know first-hand how policy at a national level actually works within the localised context. Failure to act as such not only admonishes the unique nature of the Islands, but also perpetuates systematic gender inequality which fails to take heed of women in the policy making space.

The Shetland 2019 Roadshow Report is intended to showcase for both local and national policymakers the real life situations faced by women on a day to day basis alongside adaptable and workable solutions. This report not only summarises the discussions at the event but also conversations with local women in shops, restaurants and community activities. The SWC attracted local media coverage with articles in the Shetland News and Shetland Times. Agnes Tolmie, SWC Chair, also spoke with BBC Radio Shetland regarding some of the outcomes of the visit.

The SWC would like to extend a warm thanks to all the women who attended on the day.



6 Main Points from Shetland Roadshow:

- ♦ **Extremely high cost of living including elevated food and fuel prices.**
- ♦ **Increase in use of zero hours contracts in employment.**
- ♦ **Lack of internet connectivity.**
- ♦ **Ongoing problems and delays with Universal Credit.**
- ♦ **Lack of provision in public transport.**
- ♦ **Unique problems to the Islands, often little understood in a national context.**

Question One

Scotland's geographical lay out is extremely important in terms of employment for people in all walks of life. Many rural areas have lower wages on average due to the nature of the work undertaken. Highland and Island areas often attract more seasonal work than in the central belt and south. However, this problem is particularly acute for rural women for a number of reasons stemming from structural gendered inequality. It is crucial that policies take into account the complexities of rural areas.

Have these issues impacted at a local level on access to health and social care services, availability of education and employment opportunities? How have the changes affected local women and communities?

Employment

Key Issues:

- The complexities of precarious contracts.
- Inaccessibility of employment in rural areas.
- Little support network for those outwith the main towns.
- Underemployment.
- Accessibility for disabled workers.

Zero hours and precarious contracts were raised by a number of women as being problematic within the Shetland Islands. This has left many women going weeks without either work or pay and no official income.

As is the make up of the labour market workforce, many women work part time in order to provide care for young children or elderly relatives.

The nature of the sheer amount of unpaid work that women do was also raised. This is particularly acute for single mothers and those whose partners are away for long periods of time working in fishing or the oil and gas industry.

Within the Islands, but particularly outwith the mainland, many individuals choose to work from home due to the physical structure of the area. This is often seen as preferable to a daily commute which can be arduous and long.

A number of women pointed out the isolating nature of this form of work but noted that for some it is really the only option due to the likes of childcare and flexibility.

“Certain places where you live can hinder employment prospects and opportunities.”

Key Recommendations:

- Community engagement around employment support to understand local issues.
- Support for disabled women in gaining access to employment, taking into account individual locality issues.
- Increased flexibility within workplaces to take account of childcare and travel times.
- Accessible guidance and support for women to engage in training and building skills for employment opportunities.

This is seen as going hand in hand with the continuous problem of there being little support network for those outwith the main towns. It is often felt that where employment falls it is out of necessity rather than choice with little options often available as to what job someone would like to partake.

The proportion of women in employment compared to men is still not seen as equal with the former being more clustered in the likes of public sector, retail and hospitality work. A particular caveat with this is that whilst women make up the majority of these jobs in the more low paid parts, men continue to dominate at a higher level and thus earn higher salaries.

Underemployment continues to be a dominant issue on the Islands. In some ways, this is seen as beneficial. The work often attracts higher rates of pay when compared to other areas of Scotland. A number of women pointed out that due to the high demand for workers, it means that many employees treat staff extremely well with added benefits.

However, this is not the case across the entire spectrum. A number of jobs undertaken by women continue to be segregated into part time precarious contracts with little to no chance of promotion or development.

Single mums are seen as limited for work. They want to progress but flexible childcare is difficult to obtain and other care provisions are difficult to find, e.g. grandparents retiring later.

“If you don’t have that local connection then you have so many problems.”

Social Security

Key Issues:

- Complex and lengthy application process for social security.
- Ongoing problems and delays with Universal Credit.
- Rural accessibility to job centres leading to sanctions.
- Accessibility for disabled workers.

Social security on the Shetland Islands can often be seen as patchy and inconsistent. The high costs of living have led to an increase in reliance on payments for a number of women. Problems with the system including an increase in the number of claimants means an ever widening propulsion of individuals, particularly women, into poverty.

Food banks are steadily on the rise in Shetland. This is a huge issue exacerbated by the layout of the Island and the high cost of living. The ongoing problems with welfare cuts and the roll out of Universal Credit have added to this increase. Inaccessibility of certain areas mean that getting to and from food banks is a double burden on many households.

Universal Credit is seen as the major and most significant problem in relation to social security for women. In tandem to this is the exorbitant waiting times women face to get their first payment as well as a punishing sanctions regime. These can occur locally for a number of reasons but much of the time revolve around transport patchiness where the individual is not actually at fault. Other local circumstances which account for meaningless sanctions may be the likes of a lack of mobile signal meaning you cannot phone up the DWP to describe the particular difficulty.

“On a national level it isn’t understood. They think of maybe a ‘poor signal’ when actually its completely ‘NO signal’. That’s something you can’t comprehend unless you know the area.

“If support systems were there this would not be happening.”

Key Recommendations:

- More knowledge of how local issues impact on women.
- Promotion of ways to claim social security, including Universal Credit “Scottish Choices”.
- Initiatives by Council to help food banks cope with increased demand.
- Exceptions on record for those who may have trouble accessing Job Centres due to local issues in order to prevent sanctioning.

Education

Education throughout the Shetland Islands is seen as highly impressive with many children gaining high qualifications. As seen across many Island areas, there is a growing tendency in Shetland for many young people to leave for Higher Education Establishments in central Scotland, rather than stay on the Islands.

Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) are seen as a pivotal way in which to enhance skills and local knowledge. These could be advanced and made more attractive to girls in more male dominated subjects.

Key Issues:

- Relocation of young people for higher education.
- Connectivity issues for students for computer-based work at home.
- A lack of options in subject choice at a Higher Education level.

There is a high rate of university acceptances for young adults from the Island. However, many graduates often do not come back, leading to a shortage of young people for much employment.

Higher education on the Islands is very much seen to be “supply driven” with some commenting that the only way many young people can partake in a subject they want is to move off the Islands. Practical placements, however, for students are often managed in order to give first hand experience.

Reliance on web based education for homework can be problematic. With poor local connectivity, some children find it difficult to complete tasks.

Key Recommendations:

- More drives to increase youth retention.
- Local initiatives for young females to uptake traditionally “male dominated” subject choices.
- Heightened discussions around Violence against Women and Girls and women’s issues in schools.

Connectivity

Key Issues

- Extreme lack of connectivity in more ruralised areas.
- The high cost and low quality of broadband.
- Reliance on internet for day to day life puts many at a disadvantage.

Signals for internet are seen as terrible and unusable in many places throughout the Islands. Where broadband is available, faster speeds are very rare. Many people have to pay higher charges for other options in order to get a connection.

“It often isn’t the cost, it’s the quality that’s the problem.”

Whilst both the UK and Scottish Government have set out their commitment to providing full roll out of Superfast Broadband throughout the country, this is yet to happen in much of the extremely rural areas of Shetland as well as the smaller Islands away from the mainland.

Roll out of broadband means that many women can take the opportunity to work from home, increasing access to work and education where there may have been barriers before due to lack of affordable and flexible childcare or care duties. It also means more women can access education, enhancing opportunities.

Due to the physical infrastructure of the Island, a key problem is phone masts for broadband connectivity and telephone cables. This can be a major problem – for instance, when one telephone mast was knocked out it shut down credit card machines meaning many businesses had to close for the day.

A key component of connectivity that is often overlooked when discussing delivery of roll out is how individuals are impacted on an economic level, regardless of availability within their area. This has a huge impact on the likes of social security checklists. The unfairness of this system means the most vulnerable within society are often left struggling.

“They just expect you not only to have internet but to have good internet.”

Errands which are simple day-to-day tasks for others can be complicated by the lack of internet. Women reported, for instance, their banks telling them to simply go online in order to make transactions when this is simply not possible. This places burdens on many women who are often too far away from physical banking hubs but are then told to go online where there is little to no connectivity.

Key Recommendations:

- Funding at a national level to increase community based schemes for broadband.
- Awareness raising nationally to understand the unique problems faced with connectivity in local areas.
- Increase in the likes of “hubs” for banking in more remote locations.

Third Sector and Cuts

Cuts have impacted hugely on the services that can be provided within the third sector. This has led to an over reliance on volunteering in order to mitigate this. Many volunteers fill paid jobs, particularly in the most rural areas of Shetland, in order to cope with demand.

There is a higher volunteering rate within the Islands with women who have reached State Pension Age being the majority.

The voluntary sector signposts individuals to organisations that can help within the Shetland Islands. Many are well connected with one another to provide expert help and advice to those in need.

Key Issues:

- The impact of cuts on local and voluntary services.
- The rise in State Pension Age and the impact this has on women volunteers.
- The burden placed on the third sector due to a lack of funding in rural areas of Shetland.

Key Recommendations:

- Increased initiatives and incentives for young people for volunteering.
- Funding “pots” for organisations at risk of money being cut.
- Heightened awareness at a national level of the importance of third sector organisations in the most rural areas of the Shetland Islands.
- Increased awareness of funding opportunities for charities.

“The little of what we do have is stretched to breaking point”.

The acute lack of funding, particularly in the most rural areas of the Island has also meant cuts to the public as well as the third sector. Libraries and local authority services have been closed or removed. This has added an additional burden to local voluntary services with many women having to fill the gaps.

“Many services couldn’t cope without volunteers, they are essential these days.”

Transport

Key Issues:

- Inconsistency and scarcity of public transport.
- Lack of joined up transport in rural areas.
- Fluctuations in prices.

In some places there is only one bus per week. Many did note that transport is much better than it used to be. When people engage with the consultation process it is thought that your views are listened to. If practical examples are given, they are considered by decision makers.

Local ferries provide a commuter service for those living on the smaller Islands to the Shetland mainland. Many families, however, often have two cars with one at home and one on the mainland in order to be able to get around.

Lengthy bus waiting times, most notably in the evenings with many stopping after 6pm, coupled with the infrequency of public transport in less inhabited localities throughout the Islands is often raised. This means that many women view car ownership as a necessity.

“It’s the physical location itself that is the main issue: if you had 22, 000 people in one town, you wouldn’t have these problems with transport.”

In terms of ferries to the Scottish mainland, whilst discounts are available, they can often take a massive chunk out of a woman’s income. Discounts, in particular, are often seasonal with prices fluctuating depending on the time of year.

“If the ferry service is essential then why are the seasonal prices high, medium and low?”

Many women feel there is much room for improvement across all aspects of public transport.

“We have one bus once a week where we stay and that’s it.”

Key Recommendations

- Greater access for those with disabilities to public transport.
- An increase in community service buses for rural localities.
- Mobile services which allow women to access vital services.
- Joined up approaches to the likes of transport.

Other Issues

Living costs are extremely high on the Shetland Islands. A large number of people live in fuel poverty with the highest cost in the country for petrol being in Shetland.

“A lot of heat is lost through wind so it is not the actual coldness but the wind that is causing this.”

Whilst women have welcomed the expansion of Early Learning and Childcare, a lack of proper flexibility coupled with inaccessibility to childcare providers in rural areas continues to be a major issue.

Many women noted that social care as employment on the Island is highly respected. Others, however, said that employment on precarious contracts within this particular sector is a reality for many women.

“There are two sides of the coin when it comes to social care.”

Question Two

The Scottish Government has made a commitment to invest £756 million in housing over 2018-19, as part of a promise to deliver £3 billion by 2021, including continued investment in rural Scotland. However, whilst housing remains an issue across Scotland, rural areas have distinct and unique problems. Lack of quality, affordable homes whether for rent or to buy is a major issue. Decent accommodation has a positive impact on women and children's health and wellbeing, training and employment opportunities, as well as the benefit of social integration. Rising living and rent costs have led many women into rent arrears or eviction.

What are the key priorities in your area around housing and living costs? What should the Scottish Government be doing to help rural women and their families?

Key Issues:

- Imbalance in size of accommodation in comparison to demand.
- Rapid increases in private sector rents.
- Empty homes in rural locations meaning less demand for amenities such as local shops.
- Limited competition in the private rental market leading to high prices.
- Increase in utility costs leading to high levels of fuel poverty.
- The price of upkeep and maintenance of properties.

Women who are struggling in low paid, precarious contracts often engage in more than one job in order to pay rent. The roll out of Universal Credit and problems with delays for the Housing Benefit Element of this has left many women fearful of being pushed into arrears or even onto eviction from their homes.

“A huge problem is people think Shetland is just Lerwick when actually people are dotted all over the Islands.”

A number of women noted the high price of maintaining homes on the Island. This is due to the likes of weather conditions and a lack of specialist construction options meaning prices for repairs can often be higher than what they would be in mainland Scotland.

One of the biggest problems within the Shetland Islands is the physical type of housing that is available, both socially and privately. The majority of accommodation consists of houses as opposed to flat dwellings which does not take into account the changing nature of households. The number of inhabitants within households are going down, yet the housing stock available tends to be for larger families.

In many villages, there are a number of empty houses which are seen as being unaffordable for people to buy due to the nature of the housing market nowadays and the demand on the Island. The more ruralised localities within the Islands have a number of properties lying empty. Due to being so rural, this means a lack of access to amenities and local shops.

“In our village, there are seven houses for sale right now. There never used to be any.”

Social housing tends to be in an area with a lack of public transport. If an individual has no car, it is extremely difficult to reach amenities or work places. This is particularly acute, for instance, if you are unemployed: distances to job centres and work interviews may become a *“vicious circle”* which keeps women out of work and at risk of social security sanctions.

“It’s not rooflessness that’s the problem, but actual homelessness.”

Increased utility costs leaves many women with little money after housing and bills have been paid. These are seen as being much higher than the majority of Scotland. Adding to this, the need for car ownership in order to access necessities and the risk of poverty for many women and their families can be seen to be extremely high.

Key Recommendations:

- Ensure community engagement around empty homes.
- Social housing to take into account availability and demand, using innovative and adaptable solutions.
- Inexpensive and sustainable solutions for insulating homes in order to alleviate fuel poverty.
- Clear signposting to social security and what women are entitled to in order to help with housing costs, including the likes of Discretionary Housing Payments.
- Increasing regulatory mechanisms around the private rental market.
- Planning around construction of new houses to have a duty to local consultations with residents. This should include listening and taking account of views with transparency at every part of the process.
- Support and assistance for those wishing to move to smaller properties.

Question Three

What are the key priorities for women in your local area?

- Accounting for the high cost of living on the Island for necessities such as food and fuel.
- Expansion of improved, affordable and accessible broadband.
- Improved support for single mothers.
- Ferry services between the Islands to be more frequent and more affordable.
- Housing to be available which is accessible as well as economical.
- System of hubs for the likes of local community meetings in more rural areas.
- Food and clothes banks to be more readily available to those staying outwith more populated areas.

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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