



Stranraer 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 Craignelder Hotel in Stranraer on Tuesday 3rd July 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?

Childcare

There is a lack of affordable childcare in the Stranraer area. Parents rely heavily on private provision. The Busy Bees playgroup was highlighted as a good facility, however the cost of sending a child there is prohibitive, particularly for families who do not benefit from the support of tax credits.

“Childcare is very expensive. There is a real reliance on family and friends to look after your kids.”

The quality of childminders in the area was highly praised. However the cost, especially for those parents with more than one child, can take a *“huge chunk”* out of salaries. More costs are incurred when paying to take children to and from childcare. Stranraer is considered a low wage area and the high cost of childcare does not reflect this.

Education

John Niven college, the only higher education facility in Stranraer, offers a limited range of courses. These include childcare, hairdressing, beauty therapy and some business and IT courses. These qualifications do not go as far as HND level and there are no retraining courses available. In the past, qualifications such as mechanics were offered, however these have been centralised and are now only available at larger campuses in e.g. Dumfries and Ayr.

There are no 'recreational' courses available at the college and any adult education must be self-funded.

"As a result people are just not skilled enough for jobs which may come into Stranraer. This is creating a 'middle group' in society."

Employment

Job opportunities in the area are usually part-time and on a temporary basis. Much of the work is seasonal. The Local Authority, cheese factories and the ferries are the biggest employers in the area. A number of women also work for voluntary organisations.

"The situation for those of us working within the third sector is really uncertain due to insecure funding"

Youth unemployment is a serious issue in Stranraer. Internships are available through the Community Jobs Fund and last for 6 months.

"They're not working long enough to build a decent CV. Something that lasts a year would offer much better job prospects for young people."

There has been very little investment in jobs in the area in recent years. Moving the ferry port from Stranraer to Cairnryan has had *"a big dent in the local economy"*, taking away not only jobs directly associated with the ferries but also trade from local shops and businesses. This has forced them to make staff redundant and in some cases close altogether.

Broadband connection in the area is slow. This limits business opportunities and can restrict economic growth. BT have recently announced the introduction of 'super fast' broadband and it is hoped this will help to attract more business to Stranraer.

Health

While there is a Community Hospital in Stranraer, many appointments are undertaken at Dumfries and Galloway Royal Infirmary. Travelling from Stranraer for an early morning appointment can be problematic.

"There's no bus that will get you into Dumfries for 9.30am."

In emergencies situations, such as heart attacks and strokes, patients are often taken by helicopter to Glasgow. Other injuries, such as broken limbs, are often treated in Dumfries. This is a five hour round trip and is considered *"unacceptable"* for people in pain.

Often when pregnant women are in labour and require to be taken by ambulance, their partners cannot be accommodated and have to travel to Dumfries themselves. There is a two bed maternity unit at the hospital in Stranraer, however it is only staffed at certain times.

"It used to be a great maternity unit. Everyone has to go to Dumfries to have their baby now."

Mental health support in the area is virtually non-existent. Women have been known to be sectioned and placed in police cells *"for their own safety."* Women's Aid workers have been asked to drive women who have been sectioned to Dumfries without any additional support. There have been instances where women who have received treatment for severe mental health issues are often not provided with patient transport and are forced to use public transport in order to get back from Dumfries to Stranraer.

Local Amenities

There are a distinct lack of basic local amenities in and around Stranraer.

“There’s no community centre. We don’t even have a town hall!”

Bigger shops that used to be in the town are closing. Many large companies, such as Marks and Spencer, are a 100 mile trip away however lorries pass through the town in order to access ferries to Ireland.

“It’s easier and better to go over to Belfast for shopping. There’s no need to drive and you can have a drink and something to eat on the ferry. It’s about £25 return per person - cheaper than getting to Glasgow or Edinburgh.”

There are two residential homes in Stranraer but no nursing homes. Caring is *“the easiest profession for women to get involved in”* as there are a number of private care companies.

Pavements were heavily criticised. They are narrow and very difficult to negotiate with a pram or a wheelchair. It would be *“impossible”* to get a double pram into most shops. The local park is well used however to get in the main gate requires moving over large bumps.

Community spirit and friendliness of the town was praised.

“One of the nicest things about Stranraer is the women who live here.”

Transport

Public transport is extremely limited. Some areas have no bus service on a Sunday and others only have one or two buses running per day. Timetables are subject to change with little or no notice. Women who have to travel to Dumfries for e.g. medical appointments on public transport face lengthy journeys. Buses to Dumfries take approximately two and a half hours and pass through most of the smaller towns along the way.

Poor transport restricts young people’s ability to access college courses in bigger towns such as Dumfries, Ayr and Kilmarnock. Trains to Glasgow are infrequent and as a result people living in Stranraer could not rely on rail services to commute to big cities.

A car is a necessity in the area. These are expensive to run, due to rising fuel and service costs. When cars are sold they have a high mileage due to the distances forced to travel to access services which, in urban areas, are taken for granted.

“It’s not fair. We’re at a real disadvantage.”

Road conditions are *“terrible”* and there are a lot of potholes. When the weather is bad and ferries cancelled, roads become very congested and are *“scary”* for drivers using them.

“Poor transport has an impact on absolutely everything in Stranraer including the economy as a whole, education and employment.”

Welfare Reform

The transition women face when transferring from Income Support to Job Seekers Allowance can result in real hardship. Only three crisis loan applications can be made in a year and if this option is exhausted there are no further safety nets. Women who are in abusive relationships and are accessing support services are particularly affected by this.

“We’ve had staff taking advantage of ‘buy-one-get-one-free’ offers in supermarkets and giving the ‘free’ item to women just so their kids can eat.”

There are concerns that the change to Universal Credit (UC), under the UK Coalition Government’s Welfare Reform Act, will cause further hardship and anxiety to women. Payments will be made on a monthly basis in arrears, whereas currently they can be paid weekly. Housing benefit is paid directly to the landlord, however under UC this will be paid to the recipient. Women will be forced to change the way they already carefully budget money they receive.

“It’s worrying that we will have to change the way we run our houses. Being paid this way means things could get really tight towards the end of the month.”

Changes to entitlement thresholds for tax credits will have a detrimental impact on a number of families. Under new rules, single people with children must work at least 16 hours per week. For couples, joint working hours 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 working, that person must be working at least 24 hours a week. Few employers will be either willing or able to provide extra hours in order to maintain tax credit entitlement. Families rely upon money they receive as a vital source of assistance.

Services to support those making benefit claims are under increased pressure as a result of changes.

“Citizen’s Advice in Stranraer is at breaking point. So many people are appealing decisions made about their benefits. A large number of cases are being won which suggests the system just isn’t working.”

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

Victim Support, social work services, Citizens Advice Scotland and solicitors are the main sources of support in Stranraer. These services were considered useful in assisting women in contact with the criminal justice system. Wigtownshire Women’s Aid have a large presence in the area, covering approximately 650 square miles.

“There’s a Victim Support coordinator based in Stranraer who is very good. They have access to police computers and run a programme whereby women can see a court room before they go to stand trial or give evidence.”

Women who have experienced violence and abuse often drop charges in cases against their abusers as *“financially it’s them who have to bear the brunt.”* Case processing times are different in Stranraer than they are in e.g. Kilmarnock—*“they’re much slower in Stranraer.”* There is a specialist domestic abuse court in Ayr and women prefer to have cases heard there than at the standard Sheriff Court in Stranraer.

There is strong agreement that women are *“made examples of”* in sentencing and punishments they receive are *“too harsh”*. Too many women are imprisoned for minor offences, such as non-payment of fines, which they often haven’t paid due to addiction brought about by complex mental health issues.

“It worries me that this number of women being given custodial sentences is increasing but the actual crime rates are decreasing.”

The distance from HMP Cornton Vale, the only women’s prison in Scotland, separates women from their families. This can further exacerbate mental health issues and does not support women to exit the criminal justice system.

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, there is not enough information available on the future of Scotland in order to make an informed decision.

"I want to know more about the pros and cons of independence and how it will affect my everyday life. This is different from the notion of 'what we would like Scotland to be like'"

Women are frustrated about the lack of information.

"All the debates are on late at night. Programmes like Newsnight are good but I'm in my bed by that time!"

Leaflets should be made available in *"plain English"* and without bias. Direct engagement with representatives from both campaigns would also be appreciated.

Young people must also be provided with enough information - especially those who will be 18 when the referendum is actually held.

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

- More affordable shops with better quality produce.
- More investment would *"bring a sense of pride to those living in the area."*
- More leisure facilities and entertainment, especially in the evening. *"There is very little for people, particularly young people, to do and everything costs money."*
- The area would benefit from an on-call midwife service - women have to travel to Dumfries to give birth and as a result many babies are born on the roadsides on the way to hospital.
- The sea should be made better use of, with more watersports etc which would bring in more money through tourism. There is a small boating marina with a shower block but it is not reaching its potential. *"Something needs to be done now that the ferries have moved to Cairnryan."*
- Improve pavements in the town. They are uneven and a risk to the elderly.
- Bring in evening classes and youth clubs to *"give people something to do at night."*

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.