

2022

ROADSHOW

Isle of Barra

& Vatersay

August 2022



The Scottish Women's Convention



Introduction

From 27th August 2022 to 2nd September 2022 we, at the SWC, carried out a roadshow on the islands of Barra to find out what issues were important to local women. It was quickly apparent to us that the women on the island were incredibly resilient and community focused – yet had to deal with some monumental challenges, made significantly worse by poor service-provision. They highlighted that there are major issues with health and social care, as well as poor communication from the local council and increasing worry around the rising cost of living.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the women of Barra who came and spoke to us, as well as the employees of the Bùth Bharraigh and the Gàradh a' Bhàgh a' Tuath. You made our trip truly special, and it was wonderful to see such strong women of all ages holding up a community.

The Scottish Women's Convention (SWC):

The SWC is funded to engage with women across Scotland to ensure that their views are represented in policy and decision-making processes. The SWC uses the views of women to respond to a variety of parliamentary, governmental, and organisational consultation papers at Scottish, UK and international levels.

The SWC gathers information using different methods, including roadshows, thematic conferences, surveys, and both in-person and online roundtable events. This submission presents the views of a range of women, reflecting their opinions, ideas and lived experience. Working together with many other equalities organisations and community groups, we use our broad network to ensure that women from a range of backgrounds are heard and acknowledged. We are continually reviewing innovative ways of engaging with women and developing our trauma-informed and culturally sensitive practice to support vital contributions from as many women as possible.



Health Care:

“When you ask how the health services are, we can say that it’s bad, bad, bad.”

The current health and social care situation on Barra can easily be regarded as a crisis, despite admirable attempts from workers, the lack of support from NHS Western Isles and Western Isles Health and Social Care Partnership is ultimately letting down the residents of Barra. During our visit, we discovered that the local GP was leaving and that locums would instead cover the area. The women of Barra have not welcomed this move, with worry being the central theme.

“At the end of the day we’re losing our GP; he’s had enough of the mismanagement.”

“I don’t know what we’re going to do; the locums are just not going to get to know you. The current doctor knows everything about you, who your family is, and we are losing that. I think it’s going to be dreadful for us.”

Women also explained to us that there is a lack of services, with most healthcare being moved out of Barra and being centralised in Stornoway. These services included optometry, physiotherapy, audiology, podiatry, mental health care and other specialised services. It was felt that healthcare is being over-centralised, creating a sense of powerlessness and a worsening of health. It was felt that more services would be moved to other islands, with there being fear surrounding a lack of commitment to dental provision. Some women explained that as their current dentist was part-time, getting an appointment was difficult – and this was made worse by people coming from other islands to use their facilities. Furthermore, despite the new Community Campus providing dental amenities there has been no commitment made to retaining a full-time dentist. This has created great worry for residents and fears that booking appointments will be remain difficult.

“We have no physio anymore. Also, we don’t have any podiatry, they used to come every three months but now that’s stopped.”

“We don’t have midwives, health visitors or care; we used to have all these people living on the island.”

“...we don’t have a CPN [community psychiatric nurse], we used to, and mental health has just went through the roof”

“To me, it’s almost getting back the services we used to have... the centralisation has killed it.”

The other key element of healthcare on the island is the lack of ambulance certainty, created by the centralisation of services. Currently when an individual on Barra phones 999 this is processed on the mainland, and unfortunately means that until backlogs are cleared the single ambulance on the island cannot be sent – unless in a critical emergency. This can also be seen when residents call for police assistance, with women stating that they feel that the current situation is complicated and results in a low quality of service. Women explained that they would feel more protected and cared for if the Western Isles had their own call centre, which could prioritise their needs and give them an improved service.

“I phoned 999 and because they were busy on the mainland, and I mean I could almost see the ambulance... but they were waiting on the call to send it out.”

“The policemen can’t come over unless they get permission... It just made you feel like you didn’t matter, they were busy, and they’re not going to bother with your wee problem.”

Social Care:

“One thing that’s massive here is the home being replaced with these independent living flats... who is going to leave their nice big home that they’ve been in for decades for a wee flat.”

A further key problem facing the women of Barra is the removal of the current care home: St Brendan’s Hospital and Care Home. This home is being replaced with self-serviced apartments as part of the NHS Western Isles Barra and Vatersay Community Campus. Islanders fear that these flats will not provide sufficient care for residents, and that many older people will choose to remain within their own larger homes than move. Women also explained that there is insecurity surrounding the jobs within the current care home, and that the possibility of new jobs, through laundry services or catering, have already been promised to other islands.

“They’re taking the care home away, we won’t have a care home, that’s going... And then when they get too bad, from dementia or whatever, and they didn’t tell us this, they’ll have to go to Stornoway or the mainland. The last chance of happiness will go, they won’t be able to see their families easily.”

“I just don’t think it’s very fair to hole older people up in these wee flats, sometimes you need to go and speak to other people.”

“They’ve outsourced all the jobs relating to it, like the laundry and stuff. That’s just to keep the jobs up in Stornoway, instead of sustaining it here.”

After consulting the proposed Community Campus plans, we were concerned to see that the self-serviced flats for care users is in close proximity to blue-light services. It seems misguided to place vulnerable peoples within a high stress location, where they may experience increased anxiety or confusion, particularly if they suffer from dementia or Alzheimer’s disease. Instead, women of Barra proposed that care services be close to the primary and secondary school. In this instance young people could provide support and social interaction for residents, creating an inter-generational care hub – and would align with the hopes of the Barra and Vatersay Community Campus to focus on citizen engagement and community.

“...if they’re committed to integrating stuff, why not use the school kids? They could go in and speak to the older people, help-out and stuff.”

Council & Government:

“We are very much the forgotten island, and we have to keep shouting... and we do.”

A key element of continued poor services to Barra is limited interaction and intervention from local councils and wider governments. Women explained to us that they had routinely advocated for improved services and had been met with constant resistance and an unwillingness to listen. They explained that this was due to a lack of diversity on boards and at decision-making levels, and that gender equality was not a priority.

“They just kid on that they’re helping us, and it isn’t just here. You can go up to Uist and you’ll hear the same story, you could go to the West coast of Lewis and hear the same thing – it’s all so Stornoway centric.”

“I mean we’ve brought issues to the highest level of the Scottish Government... aside from Nicola Sturgeon, and yeah... we just don’t feel like they’re listening.”

“I don’t know if you saw it on the news, but we were the only council in the whole of the country that had a whole male board, there were no women on it, and it’s these guys that have been there for years and years.”

This misogyny faced by women in Barra was existent across debates with local councillors and government. Many highlighted to us that it was those at the higher levels of management that presented the biggest barrier to women getting their views across. They also explained that the current set-up of local government prevented women from applying to be councillors as the logistics did not allow for adequate childcare. Women stated that meetings are always held in Stornoway and that this meant leaving their families behind which was not an option, it was therefore suggested that meetings could be held across the islands to facilitate more women entering the political spectrum.

“There probably is some misogyny. They are so narrowminded and blinkered, and see if you had women on that council, they would see the good that we do. But they just see us as some women on Barra... we’re not important.”

“I’ve had to argue about how male dominated our management level is... we are strong women, but we are hitting a brick wall.”

“I would say from my own experience, that the problem lies with the top levels of management more than the front-line workers. These men have been there for years and don’t want to change.”

“It’s run by men in grey suits, there are no women. It’s quite old-fashioned here.”

Infrastructure:

Housing

“One of the real problems here is housing, it’s a massive, massive problem.”

Another major issue highlighted by the women of Barra was the insufficient housing on the island. Women explained that the council were not currently doing enough to build new homes, causing a housing shortage. It was felt that the lack of housing was partly due to people owning second-homes, resulting in there not being enough homes for residents or those who seek to move to Barra. Residents explained that this was those wishing to have a holiday home, own an Airbnb or preserve a home for their children. Some stated that the lack of housing had a knock-on effect on to the local economy, with people who could contribute unable to. Therefore, more housing could create a more stable and fruitful economy, as well as an island filled with improved skills and younger people.

“There are lots of qualified builders and tradesmen across the Western Isles, and I’m sure the council and the Scottish Government could be putting more money into more sustainable homes.”

“I think it’s a Scottish thing about property, we have a lot of issues about second homes, people struggling to get homes and have somewhere to stay.”

“They need to build more houses for new families and things... if a young family can move to the island and bring new skills, that’s a good thing.”

Some women also felt that more needed to be done by the Crofter’s Commission to effectively manage the non-active crofts which could free up valuable land for further housing provision. Currently both owner-occupier and tenant crofters must ordinarily reside on or within 32km of a croft, however women felt that this was not being strictly adhered to, limiting housing on the island. Furthermore, crofts present difficulties in purchasing and redeveloping land in order to improve services to the island. Women explained that due to debates surrounding personal territories, there have been regular obstacles for the Hebridean Housing Partnership in procuring land for development. This was posited as being due to years of disappointment with councils and governments, creating a sense of reluctance and lack of trust between locals and officials. Therefore, it is imperative that the Crofter’s Commission look into potential breaches of regulation on Barra and that the Hebridean Housing Partnership consider how to repair trust between locals and councils.

“The Crofter’s Commission really need to reign it in, because then that would release so much land and people could get grants and loans to build houses.”

“The key problem is land; it’s trying to get bits of land. Barra people are really, really tight about their land, I suppose it’s inherited from centuries where a wee bit of land was all they had to live on... it’s something that characterises an island that has been ground down over centuries into poverty”

Infrastructure:

Transport

“So, we get a ferry to Barra over to Eriskay and then a taxi gets you, which then takes you all the way through to Benbecula, and then you’ve got to wait five hours for a plane, which takes you to Stornoway.”

Women told us about the difficulties they regularly face when accessing transport services to and from the island. The poor transport links that exist have led to isolation and frustration amongst residents, who feel that due to the unreliability of current services they are being routinely let down. They have told us that ferries are consistently cancelled, and that the limited air service means that they must make convoluted trips. This was seen as a particular problem for anyone traveling for surgery in Stornoway, with it being suggested that travel to-and-from Glasgow would be more amenable. Women explained that the current transport situation is highly impractical, particularly for elderly and disabled people and therefore reconsideration would be valuable.

“It’s a knock-on effect, if one goes wrong, it impacts the other ferries... they’ve got nothing spare.”

“My friend has cancer and has heart issues, and it’s very hard for a disabled person to get up at that time in the morning in winter and in darkness, to get ready for a ferry at 6am.”

“They’ve reduced the planes, we used to have a really wee helpful service between Barra and Benbecula, and people would use it for the hospitals and things. But they took it away. The very same week, it was like a slap in the face, they put on an extra bus service for people going from Lewis to Inverness. You know, it was completely insensitive.”

Inaccessibility was also highlighted when women spoke of the lack of walking paths on the island, with manoeuvrability between towns and villages being made difficult. Women explained that due to a lack of sports facilities on the island, walking or cycling was a good alternative – however due to the unsafe element of current road systems, they did not feel comfortable carrying out these activities. The lack of paths also had an impact on women with small children, as they could not easily negotiate grass verges with prams. Therefore, in order to align with the Outer Hebrides Local Transport Strategy for 2020-30’s focus on improved health and reduced carbon emissions, it would be highly beneficial to provide walking and cycling routes for residents and visitors.

“They’re telling us to get more active by walking, but we don’t have any safe paths. Also, we get lots of people visiting to cycle on the island – but no cycling routes? That just means there’s more likely to be an accident.”

Infrastructure:

Connectivity

“We have been shouting about this for years!”

The women of Barra explained to us that Wi-Fi availability and phone service was not guaranteed and sometimes very poor across the island. Some areas were better serviced than others, with there being a clear postcode lottery in connectivity reliability. Some felt worried that the increased need for good Wi-Fi service would hinder access to healthcare, which is gradually becoming more online. However, most stated that due to the island’s inaccessibility video-links were in use prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, meaning that they felt more prepared than other places in Scotland. The increased use of videocalls has provided more educational opportunities for young people, with universities incorporating virtual learning as standard. This has been welcomed by the women of Barra; however they do not feel that this is a totally suitable alternative: with it being highlighted that the social element of university is highly important.

“Well, if you go down to Vatersay it’s not great, but in Castlebay it’s really good – I would say that it’s better than some of the Wi-Fi on the mainland.”

“Video-links aren’t new here, and it’s funny because we had been asking for years for some organisations to do them for us... and it turns out they could have done it all this time.”

“I would actually say that Covid has made them realise that they can do lots of courses online.”

“...a big part of the university experience is the social life of it and sitting in front of a screen is not the same experience.”



Education:

“You need to have good education and good services to attract families to move here.”

Education was also a major talking point with the women in Barra, as there is increasing concern amongst residents that it is becoming too centralised. Women explained that the rising use of E-Scgoil, an online learning tool, may minimise teacher/student contact and worsen the quality of education given. They also stated that the incorporation of both the primary and secondary school into one ‘hub’, alongside health and social care, would be of detriment to pupils. Women proposed that these new buildings did not have guaranteed better facilities and moved the school closer to the local Co-operative shop: encouraging unhealthy eating habits. These unhealthy habits were worsened by the lack of a home economics teacher, with a local group having to take on this role to ensure that children were learning about good meal preparation.

“They’re centralising the education as well, with E-Scgoil. They’re linking the school timetables throughout the islands, so the teachers can teach from Stornoway... teachers down here will dwindle, there will be babysitters put in classrooms and it’ll be all online.”

“They’re moving the school to beside the Co-op, all the kids are going to eat is rubbish.”

“They’ve been doing cookery with some of the kids... and it’s been so successful... they’re used to fast foods for their dinners and a bottle of coke, and they’ve not seen many green veggies in their lives.”

This redevelopment has also created worry with regards to police facilities being in close proximity to schools. Residents stated that they had been consulted and had rejected calls to incorporate police services into the larger school building, however the changes made have

placed the police station near the local college. There is some concern that this could put some young people in danger, as well as those who are utilising health services.

“Yeah, okay they’ve listened to us about the police being near the school – but it’s still close to the hospital.”



Climate Change:

“Well, we have the turbines and that gets fed back into the grid, but we don’t really see a direct impact.”

From speaking with women in Barra, it became clear that there was a strong sense of environmentalism. Many women stated that they felt concerned about a lack of support from governments, and that due to poor energy friendly strategies they had been forced to use fossil fuels for heating their homes. They explained that they were heavily reliant on oil and coal as a fuel source, and that this was despite continued calls for renewable options: like solar panels and wind turbines. Some women explained that they wanted more off-grid choices, as they did not feel that they currently benefited from the turbines already on the island.

“It would be good to have a self-sustaining island, where we could just make our own electricity, and anything extra could be fed into the grid.”

“The turbines feed back into the national grid, but I’m not sure how we see the benefit. This kind of thing is very indirect. What I want is a government driven initiative to help small communities have their own turbine, that would supply our own homes and be off-grid.”

They also proposed that if more employment and training opportunities were provided for young people in renewables, jobs could be retained on the island and the island could become a producer in cleaner energy. Therefore, ensuring that women on Barra are able to reduce their carbon footprint is essential in creating a greener Scotland.

“They are really going to have to push the apprenticeships for the renewables in such a small place, there’s not a single person who is trained in it. They need to offer more apprenticeships in these rural places, they need to train the kids, they’re capable but they also need to provide more jobs.”

Furthermore, poor transport on the island has had a knock-on effect on the local economy and has also disrupted the construction of essential renewable infrastructure. For example, we were told of a community-owned wind turbine project which has taken eight years to install. This was attributed to poor weather, but also the lack of transport infrastructure existent created major delays and difficulties. Women explained that this was particularly stressful as they hoped to become a more environmentally friendly island and help reduce the impact of climate change.



“Installing that turbine was a nightmare, we had so many issues: planning, weather... but also the transport links. How were they going to get a big turbine installed with the ferries being what they are?”

Cost of Living:

“For during the winter I’ve said to my daughter that she would be sleeping in with me to try and cut fuel costs down and keep warm.”

Throughout our conversations with women the rising cost of living loomed ever-present: from health to housing. Women are genuinely worried about what the winter will bring for Barra, and in an island that already suffered from major fuel poverty – they are concerned how this will worsen. Some residents felt that it was unfair that domestic oil had not been included within price caps, as for some it was the only way of heating their homes. Therefore, it is imperative that the Scottish Government attempt to create a more inclusive fuel strategy, or improve availability for greener, more sustainable energy sources.

“...it was already an island with massive fuel poverty... extreme fuel poverty. A lot of the poverty is hidden, so it’s not something you will necessarily see.”

“The fuel prices here have been ridiculous, and you know... now that the energy cap has gone up I think a lot of people will be really concerned.”

“They could include domestic oil in the price cap, because it’s not fair, we don’t have the option of gas.”

Women also explained that food prices on the island have been increasing and that as their local Co-operative is classed as a convenience store, prices remain higher than on the mainland. The increasing cost of food and drink has had a knock-on effect to local businesses, who have had to raise prices to cover costs: causing increased worry across the island. Overall, the women of Barra feel that more could be done to mitigate the impact of the rising cost of living by governments, and that the winter is going to be particularly difficult.



The prices in the Co-op are just unbelievable; your eyes are popping out of your head. We did a comparison, because they don’t count it as a proper supermarket, it’s just a convenience store, we get extra added on.”

Brexit:

“Fishing, tourism, food and staff are the big things here that Brexit has affected.”

The impact of Brexit has been clear across the country, with Barra being no different. Women told us that they had noticed a significant difference across sectors, from employment to transport. They explained that ferry dependability had changed – with there being more cancellations and changes to timetables. Women stated that due to increased paperwork, ferries left earlier in the morning to allow exports to make tight schedules, resulting in a change of service for residents. We were also told of increasingly unreliable flights by residents, with them pointing to a recent statement by the Scottish Transport Minister, Jenny Gilruth, who proposed that there had been a doubling of cancellations for Barra flights since Brexit. This has been attributed to the withdrawal of the European Geostationary Navigation Service (EGNOS), which assisted with safety in airports where weather conditions can create poor visibility.

“Can you believe that our ferry is messed up because of Brexit? That we were promised no paperwork, and instead there’s so much that our ferry has to leave an hour earlier in the morning so that the fish lorry can get to the fish markets in Glasgow to get the paperwork done.”

They also felt that due to the removal of free movement of peoples from the EU Barra’s tourism industry had suffered. Hotels struggled to meet demand as they lacked essential staff, particularly over the summer months, while local businesses have not been receiving essential goods. Some women explained that this was of great worry to them, with tourism being one of the key modes of income for Barra, with its reduction worsening an already tough economic situation.

“Brexit has been ridiculous, where do I start? The hotel couldn’t put on lunches last summer because it couldn’t get the staff to do it... the tourist trade has been badly affected by Brexit.”

“We’ve lost our free movement of peoples; we’ve lost people coming in to enrich our culture and enriching our whole experience of the world.”

“The wee producers are being squeezed out by Brexit and the biggies are secure.”



Community:

“I mean the community itself is very vibrant... it’s always had to be like that because we don’t get everything handed to us on a plate.”

A consistent theme when speaking to the women of Barra was the strong sense of community existent across the island. They stated that as they had been routinely let down by those in positions of power, they had been left no choice but to step up and fill the roles of leaders and organisers. Women explained that they looked after one another, providing emotional as well practical help to their fellow islanders. This was done through local connections, and the community councils, which dealt with a range of problems: including health and social care, housing, and justice. One resident also stated that women had traditionally had a key role within Barra community life as men were more likely to be working out at sea, meaning women had to step in. It was clear from speaking to women that despite the continued lack of support, they rallied to help those around them and to make life better on Barra.

“Women in Barra are proactive; we organise everything ourselves.”

“We are very good at looking after each other, and we look after each other really well... but that means we don’t get the support we need.”

“...our community council meeting is soon, so that’ll be us back to a full council again, it’s mad the stuff they deal with. They have to deal with a huge variety of things... like other ones are dealing with dog poo and grass cutting, whereas they’re doing transport and health.”

“Women are historically very strong in these communities; they had to be because the men would be out at sea for long periods of time. So, women were just left to get on with it, they had to hold their own.”



Conclusion:

Our time spent in Barra was enlightening, with it becoming clear that the women there were pillars of the community. These women have had to fight to be heard by a local council, which is not always listening, while also dealing with limited services and resources. Health and social care was seen to be the most pertinent issue by those we spoke to, and therefore it should be a high priority for the Western Isles health board to seek to reduce health inequalities and work collaboratively with residents.

8 Key Recommendations

Below we have highlighted eight key recommendations we believe align with the wants of the women of Barra:

- Increased health provision for the people of Barra, through more visits from specialists (e.g. optometrists, physiotherapists, etc.) and more stable positions being made available: including a permanent GP.
- Provide more clarity surrounding the proposed care home changes, as well as reconsider outsourcing laundry and catering jobs to other islands.
- Improve gender equality at decision-making level within local council and carry out council meetings across the Western Isles, rather than remaining permanently based in Stornoway.
- Consult with the Crofter's Commission to better regulate crofts, which could open land for redevelopment.
- Liaise with CalMac Ferries Ltd. and Loganair to improve the dependency and efficiency of ferries and plane services.
- Ensure better quality connectivity for islanders, through better Wi-Fi and data provision.
- Commit to providing in-person teaching for children across the islands, including a Home Economics teacher.
- Reassess price caps on domestic oil and provide assistance to combat rising fuel costs.



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