



CONFERENCE REPORT

29th August 2026

Pearce Institute Glasgow

The Scottish Women's Convention

Your Community, Your Say,

Women's Priorities



Agnes Tolmie

SWC Chair

Strong communities don't just happen; they rely on places for people to meet, services that keep people connected and safe, and people willing to give their time and energy to help build them. All too often, it is women who are holding it all together.

Women run toddler groups, check in on older neighbours, care for family members, raise money for schools, help at food banks, organise local events and support people who are struggling. Much of this work is unpaid and often goes unnoticed, yet communities are coming to rely on it more and more every day.

Around 628,000 people in Scotland provide unpaid care, with almost 60% of them being women are providing that unpaid care. These figures show just how much responsibility women have to carry on top of their other personal commitments.

At the same time, many of the services that support communities are being cut back. Community centres are closing, library hours are being reduced, hall hire is becoming more expensive, youth clubs are disappearing and local groups are struggling to secure funding.

When services are cut, the need doesn't just magically disappear. Instead, increased pressure is placed on families, volunteers and community groups, and again, women are the ones expected to pick up most of the slack.

If local authorities and governments truly value the contribution women make to their communities. That contribution must be matched by proper support. Local services need to be protected, community organisations need more secure funding, and women should have a genuine say in all proposals before services are cut or removed.

Women have helped hold communities together for generations, but the expectation shouldn't be that they continue to do more with less. Strong communities need robust local services, proper investment and support for the women who keep them going.

Women have done their bit, now its high time they get the backing they so rightly deserve.

“You can't ask women to hold communities together and then take away the spaces, services and support that they need to do it.”

Agnes Tolmie, SWC Chair

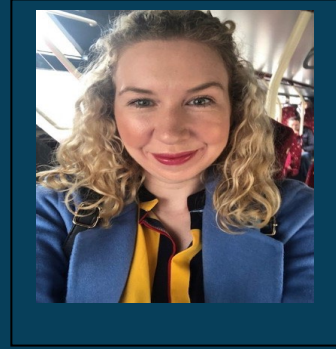
8 Key Points & Recommendations

- **Provide a Social Care system that works for everyone.**
The informal care, organising and support women provide should not be taken for granted and instead should be backed by proper services, resources and infrastructure.
- **Protect and invest in local community spaces.**
Community halls, centres, libraries and local hubs should be recognised as essential spaces for connection, support, advice and participation.
- **Provide longer-term and more secure funding.**
Community and third-sector organisations need multi-year funding in order for them to plan ahead, retain staff and deliver consistent support.
- **Simplify funding, procurement and reporting.**
Processes should be easier to navigate so smaller organisations can spend more time supporting communities and less time on administration.
- **Give communities more influence over local decisions.**
Local people should have a stronger voice in how services, funding and resources are designed and used in their own areas.
- **Ensure women help to shape policies and services.**
Women's lived experience should inform decisions from the outset, rather than being added through consultation and after plans have already been developed.
- **Strengthen links between community groups, trade unions and public services.**
Better partnership working and signposting would help people access the right advice, support and expertise more quickly.
- **Make women's safety and equality central to community planning.**
Issues such as violence against women, misogyny, transport, public space usage and access to services should be considered in local planning and decision-making.



Cat McMeeken

Cat has been Deputy Director of Equalities for Equalities, Inclusion and Human Rights at the Scottish Government since April 2023, having previously served as Deputy Director for Leadership, Culture and Wellbeing in health and social care from the start of the Covid-19 pandemic.



Her earlier roles include Head of Housing Services, overseeing regulation and future design of private and social housing; Head of Police Strategy and Performance, leading the establishment of Police Scotland and its "Policing for the Future" strategy; and Head of Child Protection, where she developed the national strategy on child sexual exploitation and abuse and helped create the Scottish Inquiry into Historical Abuse. She began her career as a solicitor with the Government Legal Service, advising on health and constitutional law and litigating asylum and immigration cases involving torture and abuse. Cat holds master's degrees in medical law and ethics, and in criminology and criminal justice. Committed to social justice, particularly socio-economic and gender equality, she also serves as Senior Civil Service Champion for Race Allies.

Cat began her contribution by discussing her work in equality policy for the Scottish Government. Her responsibilities include women's rights, violence against women and girls, anti-racism, disability and British Sign Language. Cat cautioned however that strategies, frameworks and government reports cannot demonstrate alone whether equality has been achieved and stressed that one of the most decisive tests to uncover whether it has is women's own experience of everyday life:

- **"The true measure of society's success is how it feels to live there?"**

Cat felt that any true test must first begin with two direct questions: do people feel safe and do they have a place where they belong.

Cat stated that for women, these questions are integral to connecting public policy with the practical conditions of daily life. She argued that rights will only ever have meaning when women can move through their communities safely, participate without fear and find places where they are recognised and supported and argued that local venues are essential to helping create those conditions.

- **"Community spaces are not luxury items...they are safe havens, platforms for connection and the bedrock of everyday wellbeing."**

Cat testified that a welcoming community environment can give a woman access to friendship, confidence, advice and services, all in one place.

- **"When a woman steps into a welcoming community space, she is connecting with peers, finding her voice, accessing vital support and breaking down barriers."**

Drawing on her own involvement in a local community hall, Cat described the many activities that brought women and families together which allowed informal support networks to develop. These relationships can identify needs early, reduce isolation and help women take part in community life on their own terms.

Women's safety was central to Cat's contribution because it determines whether women can participate as equals in education, employment, public space and civic life.

- **"Safety is one of the foundations of equality."**

Cat said that it was grossly unfair that women must continually calculate risks to their own safety and because of this equal participation often seems out of reach. Cat went on to link increased violence against women and girls to wider gender inequality and called for preventative measures that address underlying causes, including misogyny and harmful stereotypes. Cat's argument placed responsibility on institutions and communities as well as on government itself.

- **"Governments can help, but local problems also need local solutions."**

Cat felt that any solutions should be shaped by women, particularly women whose lives are directly affected by the services and environments that are under threat. Inviting women to attend is not the same as sharing influence:

- **“We must ensure women’s voices are not simply brought into the room but that women help shape and create the solutions.”**

Cat presented women as leaders whose knowledge, experience and ideas are vital to creating effective policy, rather than solely as people affected by decisions.

- **“Your expertise, your lived experience and your leadership are essential to the governance of Scotland.”**

Cat ended by bringing the focus back to the women in the room and stressed that the local spaces where women meet, build relationships, support one another and organise.

- **“...is where the magic happens - right here.”**

Jill Keegan

Jill is Programme and Partnerships Manager at the Scottish Community Alliance, where she works with national intermediary networks to strengthen collaboration across Scotland’s community sector. Her experience spans community-based and strategic roles, supporting people facing multiple inequalities including migrant women and girls, Gypsy/Travellers, older disabled people, and young people experiencing homelessness, and helping them to build on their skills, contributions, and leadership to create local change. She is motivated by the diversity and creativity of Scotland’s communities and believes the community sector, the part of the third sector owned and led by local communities, has a vital role to play in shaping Scotland’s future.



Jill’s contribution focused on her work with Scotland’s community sector and the role local people play in helping to shape the places they live. Jill described the wide and varied networks that operate across the country:

- **“There are literally thousands of local community groups and organisations, from remote and beautiful island communities to our towns and cities, all working every day to make their communities better places to live.”**

Jill highlighted the range of work these groups deliver, often with limited resources and in challenging conditions:

- **“It is astounding to see the breadth of work being delivered, despite a system that can sometimes feel fundamentally stacked against them.”**

Jill also noted that **“70% of social enterprises are run by women.”**

A central theme of Jill’s contribution was the value of local knowledge. She stressed that community organisations mostly build their knowledge and understanding through close relationships and direct engagement with people’s lived experiences.

- **“The strength of the community sector comes from communities’ own knowledge, local knowledge and shared learning.”**

Jill reflected on the fact that communities should not be expected to fit into a single model of practice:

- **“Communities are complex, diverse and sometimes complicated but that’s all right.”**

She then went on to discuss the growing responsibilities which were now being placed on community organisations, with many of them taking on the management of buildings, services and other local assets as

part of their efforts to improve their local areas. Jill stressed that whilst this could be seen to be a move towards giving communities more control, it could also bring difficulties in relation to funding, planning and regulatory requirements. Jill argued that these barriers should never be treated as unavoidable:

- **“If we just accept that funding is difficult and complex, it is never going to change.”**

Jill questioned whether it was fair that small organisations were being expected to lead long-term projects while working within systems that make investment uncertain:

- **“How can small community organisations be expected to take responsibility for difficult assets, attract investment and deliver long-term regeneration if administrative and regulatory processes are continuously putting that investment at risk?”**

Jill pointed to a persistent gap between communities’ capacity to lead change and the margins that existing systems give them to work from:

- **“That gap between what communities can do and what systems allow them to do is a real source of frustration.”**

Jill called for a need to **“shift the terms of the debate.”** and argued that communities need greater control over local decisions, more secure funding and systems that make their work easier to carry out.

- **“There needs to be changes in the system...changes in how we fund communities and projects.”**

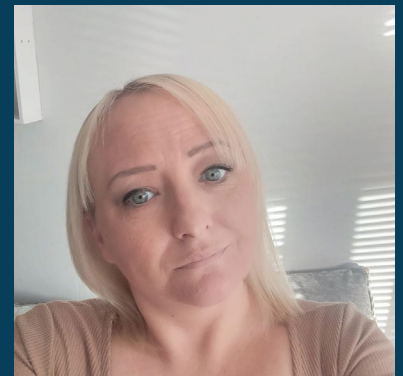
Jill closed by emphasising the need to turn policy commitments into practical support:

“Passing legislation is the easy part...implementation is where the real work begins.”

Jill’s contribution clearly demonstrated how community empowerment requires much more than just asking local organisations to take on greater responsibility: they also need the authority, funding and practical support to make that responsibility sustainable long term.

Tracy Forrester

Tracy began volunteering in Drumchapel at a young age and has remained actively involved in a wide range of community initiatives ever since. Over the past 10 years, she combined her volunteering and professional experience with G15 Thriving Places alongside her studies at the University of Glasgow. Having successfully completed her degree, she is now a fully qualified Community Development Worker with G15 Thriving Places, where she continues to support and help empower local communities.



Tracy’s contribution brought a strong and practical community development perspective to the event. She spoke about growing up in an area where facilities, services and opportunities were gradually being lost, and how this helped shape her understanding of what communities need.

- **“Growing up, we saw a lot of places being taken away from us - things that we desperately needed, including safe spaces.”**

This experience motivated her own involvement towards community development because **“[she] wanted to do something.”**

Tracy described becoming involved in community activities relating to food poverty, building skills, organising events, undertaking environmental projects, setting up women’s groups and offering support to people who were new to the area. Tracy said that these activities were not only about giving people something to do, but also about creating places where people could meet, build confidence, share information and feel more connected to their community.

A particularly important principle for Tracy was accessibility; she wanted it to be known that **“anybody can come.”**

She described creating an environment where people in the community could come along without feeling that they didn't fit in or that they needed to understand how a service worked.

- **“Residents can come along and just take part.”**

Tracy felt that this kind of open approach was particularly important for people who may have felt isolated, were unsure about asking for help or who were unfamiliar about what their community offered them.

Her contribution also made clear that community activity should involve much more than the odd event or entertainment.

- **“It's not just about making things fun for people. It's about educating and supporting people as well.”**

Tracy described her work with refugees and people who had recently arrived in the community with local groups often being the first to help them form relationships and offer information and practical support on how local services operated. She also spoke about witnessing severe financial hardship in many families.

- **“Some people don't even have the money to go to the shops.”**

Tracy argued that in these circumstances, support must begin with the reality and need of the person standing in front of you before anything else. Asking them questions as simple as **“what do you need to eat?”** is a way to help break down barriers.

Overall, Tracy showed how important it is for local community workers to have the freedom to respond in practical and flexible ways. Rather than trying to fit everyone into the same standardised framework, support should be shaped around the different needs of the people coming through the door.

Tracy finished by stressing that community development is about practical support, building confidence, sharing knowledge and creating opportunities for people to come together. At the heart of this is making sure people feel welcome, listened to and able to get involved without unnecessary barriers being stacked against them.

Ann Henderson



Ann has a background in the trade union movement, having worked in the rail industry, at the STUC and is currently working with the RMT. Trade Unions In Communities is a project which started in Edinburgh Craigmillar but now works from other locations too. Funded by trade union branches locally, TUIC in Craigmillar provides advice and information services, arranges and supports local events, and works with local community groups. Being based in the community means that those working from home, in isolated jobs, or with particular needs can find us locally. Their Migrant Café on Saturday mornings has proved popular, and trade unionists from different unions and sectors work together there.

As the final speaker of the day, Ann explored how trade unions can help strengthen community life, particularly as changing patterns of work make traditional workplace support less accessible.

She reflected on the impact of COVID-19, noting that remote working, fragmented workplaces and insecure employment changed how many people viewed trade unions as a place to seek advice. Ann gave some background on her project, which started in Craigmillar, and described how it is a community-based trade union hub offering drop-in support, information and signposting. Ann stressed that a key principle of the hub is that no single organisation must provide every kind of support:

- **“We don't all need to do everything, and we don't all need to know everything but we can direct people to those that can help them.”**

Instead, Ann argued for stronger connections between the knowledge and expertise which is already present within communities:

- **“There are experts on everything in every community, but you don’t always know how to find them or where to go.”**

Ann stated that the hub provides an accessible and welcoming point of contact where:

- **“People feel that it’s a place where they can get help, advice or support.”**

Ann also highlighted the limitations of short-term, precarious funding, which can encourage organisations to create new projects rather than connect with work already underway:

- **“We spend a lot of time reinventing something that is already happening simply to make it fit a funding application, and that isn’t very efficient.”**

Ann felt, that for this reason, connecting people with the right existing support is central to the hub’s approach. Ann emphasised that trade unions can provide guidance on a much wider range of issues than many people realise, including pregnancy and maternity rights, domestic abuse, insecure employment, discrimination and employment rights.

- **“There is a lot of protection there for women, but there is also a lot of misinformation. Your trade union can help sort some of that out.”**

Drawing on her own experience as one of Scotland’s first female train drivers, Ann described becoming pregnant in a workplace with little experience of being able to respond appropriately. Knowledge of employment law and access to union representation enabled her to challenge the unfair treatment she had received:

- **“There was legislation protecting me from pregnancy and maternity discrimination, and because of that we were able to challenge what was happening.”**

Her message to women was clear: **“Don’t ever feel that there are any barriers.”**

Ann’s contribution positioned trade unions as part of the fabric of community support rather than something completely separate from it. As workers and their families are all members of a community, the knowledge that trade unions bring, can often play an important role in helping communities thrive.

Discussion

After hearing from our guest speakers, we held a question-and-answer session during the morning session, followed by roundtable discussions after lunch.

The following section will outline the views of the women we spoke to in these roundtable sessions where they were invited to share their views on what community life meant to them.

The women reflected on issues such as what helps make women feel safe, supported and included in their communities, the valued contribution that women can make and the barriers that often prevent them from taking part or having their voices heard.

“Every woman has value - we might not recognise our skills at first, but we all have something we can contribute.”

1. Safety Is Shaped by our Everyday Environment

The women we spoke to described safety as something they had to think about through every aspect of their everyday lives whether it be walking home, using public transport, parking, accessing services or moving through public spaces and their own communities after dark.

“If I can’t park close to where I’m going, that can mean walking through somewhere I don’t feel safe.”

“I stopped going into town because I didn’t feel safe walking back to where I had to leave the car.”

Poor lighting, limited transport and concerns about policing all affected how safe women felt. Participants highlighted how women's safety is not only about crime prevention but also about infrastructure and the condition of local environments.

- **"It's one thing to save money on lighting, but it shouldn't come at the expense of people's safety."**
- **"To me, a safe community has facilities close at hand and within reach."**
- **"Safety, for me, means being able to walk about and go places without feeling frightened."**
- **"Safety isn't just policing. It's lighting, transport, CCTV, parking and how easy it is to get from one place to another."**
- **"You hear footsteps behind you and your heart starts racing, even though it could be the nicest person in the world."**

The women felt that well-maintained streets, green spaces and visible investment in a community all contributed to their feelings of safety and wellbeing but unfortunately many areas were seeing cuts to services and this was having a detrimental impact on this.

- **"If a place looks cared for...clean streets, green spaces, garden, it makes you feel better about [living] there."**
- **"You should make an area safer for the people who live there every day, not just because tourists are coming."**

2. Community Infrastructure and Participation

The women agreed that community centres, libraries, halls, transport and local services were integral parts of community life however many of these essential services were either being closed, relocated or becoming harder to reach. They stressed that the move to less favourable and accessible locations made many women stop attending altogether.

- **"When people can't get to the group anymore, the only result is isolation."**
- **"We're centralising services instead of keeping them in the communities where people actually need them."**

The women we spoke to also viewed transport and affordability as being particularly important. They stressed that it may be all very well saying that a service exists, but if many women cannot afford to travel, arrive there safely or fit the journey around their caring and employment responsibilities, it can never truly be seen as being genuinely accessible.

- **"A service can be excellent, but if you can't afford to travel to it, it isn't really accessible to you."**
- **"If you have to wait for another bus somewhere you don't feel safe, that changes whether you even go out at all."**
- **"If we want strong communities, transport has to be part of the infrastructure."**

3. Women's Unpaid Work Is Holding Communities Together

During our discussions, women's involvement was seen as being central to sustaining communities through such things as their caring roles, volunteering, organising activities, checking on neighbours and providing informal support. The consensus was that many of these contributions still remain unpaid and can therefore be taken for granted.

- **"It's women who are running the clubs, organising the cafés, looking after the gardens and volunteers and so much of that work is unpaid."**

- **“Women are often holding several generations together at the same time.”**
- **“Necessity is a good master, when something needs doing, women often roll up their sleeves and get on with it.”**

The women we spoke to also described having to balance paid work with childcare, caring for older relatives and other responsibilities. When formal services are unavailable, women all too often have to fill that gap.

- **“A lot of community support only looks free because women are absorbing the cost.”**
- **“If the service isn’t there, the family ends up becoming that service.”**
- **“Care is so often treated as an expectation rather than a contribution.”**

Participants argued that unpaid care and volunteering should be recognised as valuable work rather than just an unlimited resource that communities can rely on.

4. Being Consulted Is Not the Same as Being Heard

The women we spoke to saw a clear distinction between being invited to speak and having any genuine influence on what happens within their communities.

Participants described consultations where they had been invited to share their experiences but then saw little evidence that anything had changed thereafter.

- **“Women’s voices shouldn’t just be heard...they should be valued and taken seriously.”**
- **“It can feel like a tick-box exercise: you’ve spoken, they’ve listened, but nothing actually gets resolved.”**
- **“It’s not enough to make promises, you need somebody who knows the community and stays connected to it.”**

The women also emphasised the need for different mechanisms to be put in place which would allow for wider and more inclusive participation.

- **“Creating space doesn’t mean everybody has to speak...sometimes people need to be allowed just to listen and take things in.”**
- **“People should be able to contribute in the way that feels [most] comfortable for them.”**
- **“[You] shouldn’t always have to go looking for support...the information needs to reach them.”**
- **“If someone has been shut down before, they may not feel safe [contributing] again.”**

The women emphasised that meaningful participation requires both accessibility and visible outcomes in order for changes to be made across communities.

5. A Sense of Belonging

Belonging was strongly associated with building relationships, recognition and having somewhere where people could feel accepted.

The women spoke about a steady decline in neighbourly contact and highlighted that women’s groups, community organisations and shared activities were fundamental to helping relationships and communities thrive.

- **“A community hub can be used in so many different ways if we actually make the most of it.”**
- **“Community becomes harder when people don’t stay long enough to build trust.”**
- **“Now, sometimes the most interaction you have with your neighbours is when they’ve taken in a parcel for you.”**

Representation was also important. Women valued being able to connect with people who shared aspects of their lived experiences and who had similar identities.

- **“Sometimes belonging means finding people who share your experiences, not just people who live in the same postcode.”**
- **“You need local communities, but sometimes you also need a community of people who understand what you have lived through.”**
- **“There is something vitally important about finding your own people.”**

Safe, supportive spaces were seen as particularly important for allowing confidence and connection to develop gradually.

- **“If women have particular safety and community needs, there has to be room to fund work that is specifically for [them].”**
- **“People develop when they feel safe.”**
- **“The language we use can demonise whole communities.”**

6. Accessible Support and Navigating Systems

The women we spoke to felt that community services could only be effective if women know they exist or work out how to access them.

- **“If support isn’t signposted, how are you supposed to know where to go? So much of it is just word of mouth.”**
- **“When everything moves out of your area, you lose more than the service - you [also] lose the local knowledge around it.”**

The women agreed that Information alone was not always enough. They also valued trusted individuals who could help them navigate healthcare, welfare, education or other complex systems.

- **“Sometimes you don’t need another leaflet you need a person who knows who to contact and can help you get there.”**
- **“Women often know something is wrong, but they don’t always know where to start challenging it.”**

Our discussion pointed to a greater need for clearer information, taking the initiative and more robust outreach and practical advocacy approaches.

7. Change Must Start Early

Many of the women that we spoke to felt that schools, families and youth activities were essential in helping build stronger and more respectful communities.

- **“It starts young - you build up that idea of helping people from the beginning.”**

Affordable clubs and extracurricular activities were also seen as important opportunities for young people to build skills and connections.

- **“After-school clubs can give young people an opportunity to change the direction their life takes.”**
- **“It should be open to everyone...where you live or how much money your family has shouldn’t decide whether you get that opportunity.”**

Participants also stressed the importance of intergenerational learning, particularly in helping younger women develop confidence and understand the value of speaking up for themselves.

- **“Your role models are one of the biggest influences on who you become.”**

Some women, although recognising the importance of building community resilience from an early age, challenged that this should not be seen as the only option. They believed that women without children, older

women and women at different life stages also needed to gain knowledge and have access to community spaces.

- **“Community spaces shouldn’t only be designed around women with young children.”**

8. Strong Communities Need Long Term Investment and Local Knowledge

The women we spoke to expressed frustration at the level of increased short-term funding projects and services disappearing just as community relationships had begun to develop from them.

- **“We keep dismantling the things that already work.”**
- **“If something has already proved that it works, why should people have to start from scratch every time they apply for funding?”**
- **“You can’t build trust if the service disappears just as people begin to use it.”**

Participants also spoke about how important local knowledge and lived experience were when establishing community needs. Women were often seen as informal community leaders who understood what was happening locally and who were able to organise support in a way that worked better for people than formal services.

- **“The people closest to the problem often understand it best.”**
- **“One person gives time, another gives an idea, another gives money - every contribution has value.”**
- **“The community had the system working, but the authorities tried to stop it because they believed they should be the ones providing it.”**
- **“Someone needed food on Monday and was told the council could come on Friday.”**
- **“[Our work] was valued by the community but not valued by the system.”**

Conclusion

Our discussions showed that women’s experiences are central to understanding what makes communities strong, inclusive and supportive. Safety, access to services, affordable opportunities, welcoming spaces and the ability to be heard all have a direct bearing on whether women can participate fully in community life.

Participants also highlighted the scale and importance of women’s contribution within their communities. Much of this work is carried out through caring, volunteering, organising and supporting others, yet it is often informal, unpaid and insufficiently recognised.

The message is clear: stronger communities depend on women’s contributions being properly valued and on barriers to participation being addressed. Women and girls should have meaningful opportunities to take part, be represented and influence the places where they live.

Recognising and supporting women’s role in community life strengthens not only their own opportunities and sense of belonging, but the resilience and wellbeing of communities as a whole.

“We need to start looking at community as an investment, not a cost.”

Thank You!

The Scottish Women's Convention thanks all women who attended our conference and who contributed online and via email. We thank our speakers for providing their contributions on the day.

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