

2024

ROADSHOW

**Inverness**

April 2024



The Scottish Women's Convention

# Introduction

From the 12<sup>th</sup> of April 2024 to the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 2024, the SWC team were in Inverness, consulting with women from the city and the wider region. The purpose of our visit was to understand the issues that these women face, with key themes arising throughout our conversations.

While speaking with women in Inverness, we heard of a range of issues, with health and social care being a significant area of concern. Women stated that current healthcare facilities were not fit for purpose, with gynaecological care and care for neurodivergent conditions being particularly poor. They also explained that social care in the area was not meeting demand, due to an ageing population and burn-out across staff.

In addition, women highlighted education gaps across the region, feeling further consideration of the education system in general was required across Scotland. This was also mirrored in views relating to transport, as current bus infrastructure across Inverness does not effectively cater to all needs. Lastly, attendees believed that many of the issues identified had been fuelled by a lack of guaranteed funding for third sector organisations, promoting poor health and development across communities.

## 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 and Social Care

While consulting with women in Inverness, healthcare was a topic of concern. They explained that due to the rurality across the region, women are often having to travel significant distances to access care, worsening health outcomes. Women believed that this was fuelled by a centralisation of facilities, with Raigmore Hospital (RH) becoming the focal point for many. Attendees generally had a variance of experience while going through care in RH, however the hospital building itself was generally seen negatively. They explained that they would like to see renovated facilities, as well as the development of new buildings to cater for the changing needs of the population in Inverness. In particular, women highlighted the rising population seen across the Highland region, with this increasing by 13.9% between 2001 and 2021<sup>1</sup>. Also, women stated that the staff within RH were struggling to provide good quality service due to increasing pressures. ‘Burnout or exhaustion’ was cited as the third most common reason for leaving the profession of nursing/midwifery in Scotland, with ‘physical and mental health’ being the second most common<sup>2</sup>. As a result, there was a sense amongst attendees that RH was insufficient at meeting these demands, requiring immediate attention from NHS Highland.

- “Distances are a huge issue. I live rurally and sometimes I’ll get sent quite far away”
- “Plus, our hospital is dated and falling apart, it’s not really fit for purpose anymore.”
- “People forget that the hospital, when it was built, was the appropriate size for the area...But the number of people has increased, and the hospital hasn’t changed.”
- “There are people on burnout now, some amazing people, who just can’t do the NHS anymore. Or they’re moving to private healthcare because it’s more lucrative”

During conversations with women, they also highlighted significant gaps in gynaecological care across the area. Despite the good work of some specialist doctors and nurses, there was a general feeling that primary care providers lacked understanding of women-specific conditions, including the menopause. Women recounted their experiences of receiving care, explaining that first-line responses were commonly antidepressants, rather than comprehensive consideration of symptoms and life-stage. Antidepressants such as citalopram and venlafaxine can be prescribed to combat hot flushes, a common menopause symptom<sup>3</sup>. However, women stated that there was an overreliance on this treatment, with one woman explaining that she had been prescribed antidepressants despite never experiencing hot flushes. In addition, there was also concern around the provision of maternity services, with expectant mothers travelling long distances to access care. During our [Caithness and Sutherland Roadshow in 2022](#), this issue also arose, highlighting the need for increased provision of maternity care across the Highland region.

- “I didn’t have any clue what was going on, I went to my doctor, and I said...that I thought it was dementia...And she told me that I was depressed, so put me on antidepressants.”
- “An improvement would have to start with the attitude of individual GPs, perhaps additional training”
- “Maternity services are in crisis. Staffing levels are too low to provide a full and safe service”

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<sup>1</sup> National Records of Scotland. (2022). Highland Council Area Profile. Available at: <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files/statistics/council-area-data-sheets/highland-council-profile.html>

<sup>2</sup> Nursing and Midwifery Council. (2023). The NMC Register Scotland. Available at: [The NMC register Scotland](#)

<sup>3</sup> The Menopause Charity. Antidepressants and Menopause. Available at: [Antidepressants and Menopause - The Menopause Charity](#)

Women in Inverness also raised the issue of support for neurodivergent conditions, explaining that initial diagnoses and subsequent care remain subpar. Of those who had sought a diagnosis for conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism, some had experienced significant barriers, namely the extensive waiting list to be assessed by a specialist psychologist. Across Scotland, 47% of adults seeking an autism diagnosis, do not meet the 252-day target for full waiting time from referral to diagnosis<sup>4</sup>. Attendees also recounted stories of neurodivergence not being effectively considered when approaching their GP with symptoms. This was accounted to a lack of understanding from primary care providers, with behaviours of women being ignored or associated with hormones. Diagnosis is recognised as a major contributor to improved outcomes for autistic people, allowing access to support and services. Therefore, women hoped to see significant adjustments in the service-provision and understanding of neurodivergent conditions, suggesting that the upcoming [Learning Disabilities, Autism and Neurodivergence Bill](#) may provide a basis for change.

- “I think I have undiagnosed ADHD; I went to my GP...and they won’t even consider me because the waiting list is four years...it was emotionally distressing...I haven’t been back to my GP since, I need to build up the courage to go again.”
- “Also, that idea that girls present differently is also just not true. It’s actually because girls are ignored in society.”
- “I’m autistic and I think there’s a lot that needs to be done to support autistic women...I was on anxiety medications, and I had depression and suicidal ideation...but my doctor never considered that I was autistic. They just saw me as unhappy, hormonal, whatever.”

Overall, the continual theme while discussing healthcare with women in Inverness was the concept of patient autonomy. Throughout interactions with healthcare professionals women felt that their concerns had not been taken seriously and were not believed, resulting in poor condition management. In cases where women were receiving treatment for conditions, they were often sidelined during decision-making, resulting in increased levels of anxiety and a distrust of doctors. Patient autonomy is regarded as a key ethical consideration across medical practice and should therefore be at the forefront of treatment planning<sup>5</sup>. Women suggested that misogyny ultimately fuelled the continued lack of patient autonomy across medical care in the Highlands, with an assumption that women were unable to make informed choices over their own bodies. This has detrimental impacts on the health and wellbeing of women across the region, acting as a major obstacle to care, and therefore, women suggested mandatory training across services, actively rooting out misogynistic stereotypes.

- “She didn’t have anyone there when the doctors were all leaning over her to help her make that decision. They know better, so she didn’t get a choice.”
- “It sounds like you were a passenger to the whole procedure [cancer treatment], not a part of it.”
- “There does seem to be this idea of ‘we know better than you’, this God status from a lot of doctors...You’re the one who knows your body best”

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<sup>4</sup> National Autism Implementation Team. (2023). Waiting Times in Adult Neurodevelopmental Pathways. Available at: <https://www.thirdspace.scot/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/NAIT-Waiting-Times-in-Adult-Neurodevelopmental-Pathways-Report-2023.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> British Medical Association. (2020). Autonomy or Self-Determination as a Medical Student. Available at: <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/ethics/medical-students/ethics-toolkit-for-medical-students/autonomy-or-self-determination>

- “When I was a teenager, I was at the doctors...and the doctor said “Sometimes teenage girls make things up for attention” ...I do think there needs to be more education with the medical professionals”

The topic of social care also arose during our time in Inverness, with women stating that it is in disarray. Across the Highland region, there were four care home closures over a 14-month period between 2022 and 2023, resulting in the loss of 141 care home beds, as well as a reduction in available care at home services amounting to 2,500 hours per week of unmet need<sup>6</sup>. Attendees proposed that the reduction across services was linked with a continued undervaluing of care work which is predominantly carried out by women. They went on to explain that this can also be seen in unpaid care, as women often take on the majority of domestic labour within the home. This work can prevent women from entering the employment market or they may take on part-time work to accommodate child and elderly care responsibilities. It was also proposed that this toil can negatively impact women’s wellbeing, placing increased burden on the Scottish healthcare system. A significant shift in viewpoints was therefore seen as required by attendees, with some suggesting that caring responsibilities be evenly split between men and women, as well as improved pay and conditions for care workers.

- “I think that [social care] has been an ongoing problem for a long time. People being put into hospital waiting for...care home beds being available.”
- “It’s like a multi-layered disaster care at the moment. And it’s because socially it’s seen as no different or no more skilled than working a till or in a café. Where actually it’s a highly skilled job and highly responsible; you’re keeping people alive.”
- “...but usually, men can make time for the marathon, for their running, their cycling, but we [women] often don’t give up our time. We know there are many mental and physical benefits of exercising...We should really take that into account”



<sup>6</sup> Highland Health Board. (2023). Annual Report and Accounts. Available at: <https://www.nhshighland.scot.nhs.uk/media/ismjfb0g/highland-health-board-annual-accounts-2022-23.pdf>

# Education

Women in Inverness raised concerns surrounding the increased reliance of online classes across educational establishments in the Highlands. During the Covid-19 pandemic, children across the country received all lessons via online formats, with varying success. Initial estimates state that Government interventions made during the pandemic widened pre-existing inequalities, including the education attainment gap<sup>7</sup>. However, it can be argued that due to the rurality seen across the Highland region, online learning may assist in bridging access gaps through the Highland Virtual Academy (HVA). Overall, women were sceptical of the positives of this programme, particularly for younger children, believing that in-class learning would be preferable, allowing for full development of social skills.

- “Other places are having to offer online classes, it works for some, but it really doesn’t work for us teachers...I think it’s a terrible idea. You need human beings in those classrooms”
- “A lot of it is remote learning now...And that changes the student experience an awful lot, because you’re not leaving your home or village.”

In relation to primary and secondary education, women also believed that there were significant gaps in provision for children with additional needs, such as autistic children. They explained that current systems do not facilitate effective support for these children, negatively impacting their educational attainment and performance. For example, parents stated that their children were removed from class and did not receive alternative lessons, with pupil support assistants (PSAs) taking on the responsibility of their care. Despite PSAs providing essential support for children with additional needs, their contributions are commonly undervalued, linking with the previous point relating to the lack of appreciation for work commonly carried out by women<sup>8</sup>. Further consideration must therefore be given in relation to mainstreaming policies across education through the effective resourcing of inclusionary procedures.

- “...we have families coming to us in crisis, and a lot of the time it’s to do with their kids in school... the approach they’re taking with autistic children is directly harmful.”
- “As a teacher, I try and develop a calm learning environment that should work for children with autism, but there is no alternative provision”

When asked how they would improve education options in Inverness, women agreed that significant change was required. Some stated that the education system needed a complete overhaul, citing a continued emphasis on exam results and university places, rather than life-skills and creativity. This was seen to be detrimental to children and young people’s mental wellbeing and employment outcomes. Also, those working in education stated that the increased bureaucracy across school estates, had created an unsustainable workload for teachers, the majority of which are women: 77% of all teachers in Scotland are women<sup>9</sup>. A survey by the Educational Institute of Scotland carried out in 2023, found that 22.7% of all members were ‘very dissatisfied’ with their workload levels and 38% felt that they could never

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<sup>7</sup> Scottish Government. (2023). Scotland’s Recovery from Covid-19: Learning. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/learning-inform-scotlands-recovery-covid-19/>

<sup>8</sup> Education Scotland. (2023). Pupil Support Staff Engagement Programme: Evaluation Report. Available at: <https://education.gov.scot/media/xsblm2hi/pss-engagement-programme-evaluation-report-july-2023.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> Scottish Government. (2023). Summary Statistics for Schools in Scotland 2023. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/summary-statistics-for-schools-in-scotland-2023/pages/school-teachers/>

complete all of their work within their contracted hours<sup>10</sup>. Therefore, a clear strategy on reshaping the education structure in Scotland is needed, with improved support for teachers as well as children.

- “I think, education, it’s in crisis across Scotland.”
- “...we’re not prioritising learning; we’re prioritising exam results. That is not allowing for children to make decisions about their own lives, the system has decided that for them.”
- “...it’s a lot of paperwork, and I don’t think people appreciate the amount of paperwork that goes into a class of say 24 kids. It’s not just 24 kids, it’s 24 profiles that a teacher needs to continually update.”

Woman also expressed concern surrounding further and higher education opportunities for young people. They explained that there is a lack of options for school-leavers, forcing many to move away, fuelling the loss of young professionals in the area. Many young people elect to attend the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI); 62% of higher education students come from the catchment area of the college, which is Highland and Island-wide, and offers a wide-range of courses at varying levels<sup>11</sup>. Women who attended our roadshow felt that although UHI provided improved educational options for local people, particularly those who reside in very rural areas, employment opportunities were poor after their time at UHI. Women who had attended, felt that they had received little support from UHI to find employment, believing that increased communication and support for alumni would be valuable.

- “...UHI have that cross-island model. So, by doing that it means they can cover really remote areas”
- “...finding a job is not seen as a priority for them [local college]. Once your bum has been on a seat, and the cheques been written, thank you and goodbye.”
- “The university is not interested in whether or not your qualification is of value to the economy in the Highlands and Islands, it’s interested in the fees that were paid to them”

Furthermore, despite the Highland region experiencing a population increase between 2001 and 2021, it can be seen that the make-up of this population, is increasingly older. The 75 and older age group, increased by 60.6% across those twenty years, while the 25-44 age group, decreased by 5.9%. It is also projected that between 2018 and 2028, the 0-15 age group will drop by 11%, further ageing the population across the Highlands<sup>12</sup>. The likely result of an ageing population is added pressure on public services, prompting women to call for improved education and employment options for young people in the area.

- “Our young people won’t invest in the Highlands because if the course isn’t available for them, they’ll go elsewhere...then they end up buying a house there and staying.”
- “I’d say, the young ones tend to leave for university of college and then they don’t come back. That’s one of the big challenges facing us. I think like, the people settling here are older, and the young ones are leaving.”

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<sup>10</sup> The Educational Institute of Scotland. (2023). 2023 EIS Member Survey. Available at: <https://www.eis.org.uk/Content/images/Research/2023MemberSurvey.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> University of the Highland and Islands. (2022). Facts and Figures: Students Numbers 2021 to 2022. Available at: <https://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/about-uhi/facts-and-figures/>

<sup>12</sup> National Records of Scotland. (2022). Highland Council Area Profile. Available at: [https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files/statistics/council-area-data-sheets/highland-council-profile.html#Population\\_Projections](https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files/statistics/council-area-data-sheets/highland-council-profile.html#Population_Projections)

# Infrastructure

## Housing

With regards to infrastructure, housing arose as an issue facing women in Inverness. They explained that there is a lack of housing available for young families, contributing to the ageing population discussed previously. Attendees also highlighted the high housing costs in the area: for example, the average house price in the Highland region for first-time buyers was £166,000 in February 2024, compared to the Scottish average of £150,000<sup>13</sup>. It can therefore be said that there is a rural premium for properties across the region, which significantly impacts young people. This is worsened by average lower earnings for full-time women workers in the Highlands than in the rest of Scotland - £606 compared to £670.80<sup>14</sup>. The deficit in incomes experienced by young professionals in the area, further worsens the local economy, pushing many to leave. One attendee, however, went on to provide her experience with the Communities Housing Trust (CHT), which provides affordable housing across the Highlands<sup>15</sup>. She proposed that community-focused projects such as this were a positive alternative solution to the current housing crisis, suggesting that further investment should be given to these initiatives.

- “Yeah, you can’t get parents to move here, which means we lose professionals, like teachers, which then shuts more schools. It’s all linked.”
- “If anything was to attract them [attendee’s children], it would be housing, but the cost of housing here is just as expensive as the Central Belt.”
- “Has anyone bought or rented a property through the CHT...It’s a fantastic scheme, I don’t know why we’re not doing more like that across the Highlands.”

Women also believed that short-term lets actively fuelled the lack of housing available in Inverness. They explained that the increase in holiday accommodation and second homes had been detrimental to communities, furthering the decline in the economically active demographic. There was some discussion on the impact of recent short-term lets licensing, with attendees remaining sceptical about whether local communities had benefited. Short-term licensing schemes came into effect in October 2022, although existing hosts were given until October 2023 to apply for a license and adhere to certain specification. The Highland Council remains the local authority with the highest number of valid applications received, 920, and the majority of these applications relate to secondary letting (i.e. where a non-primary residence is let out)<sup>16</sup>. Women suggested that this had resulted in local BnB owners being less likely to make the required changes or pay for a license, whereas external property owners could afford the additional charges. They believed that this ultimately created an untenable property market, while simultaneously removing tourism opportunities for local people.

- “...you’re getting whole communities wiped out because they’re all holiday accommodation now. If your village loses its school, because the entire community has become short-term lets...you’re not going to get anyone wanting to live there”
- “...I don’t think that the short-term let licensing really made a difference.”

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<sup>13</sup> Office for National Statistics. (2024). Housing Prices in Highland. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/housingpriceslocal/S12000017/>

<sup>14</sup> Office for National Statistics. (2023). Labour Market Profile – Highland. Available at: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157421/report.aspx#tabearn>

<sup>15</sup> Communities Housing Trust. (2024). About Us. Available at: <https://www.chtrust.co.uk/>

<sup>16</sup> Scottish Government. Short-Term Lets Licensing Statistics Scotland to 31 March 2023. Available at: [1 \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/)

- “The only ones who can afford to do anything with these houses [short-term lets], are the ones who were wealthy enough in the first place...It’s too expensive for one wee BnB to put in the fire doors, the lighting, etc...You know, the whole Highland hospitality, it’s just gone now.”

## **Transport**

In addition, women discussed the transport infrastructure in Inverness, with buses being viewed as the key mode of public transport. Some women had positive reviews for the service, believing that it had greatly improved since the Highland Council had launched a pilot project, providing buses on a small number of public and school transport routes. The Highland Council has invested in 12 buses to deliver services at a reduced cost in comparison to commercial contractors<sup>17</sup>. This programme was seen optimistically by some attendees, allowing women to become more mobile across Inverness. Women also believed that the recent Under 22s bus pass, which provides young people with free bus travel across Scotland, had assisted in creating improved social and economic opportunities for this group.

- “I mean we were getting buses every hour, and now it’s every ten minutes. So, we’re delighted at the new service.”
- “We’ve got a wonderful service, and we had to fight hard for that...It’s vastly improved.”
- “The freedom that it [Under 22s bus pass] gives them is great. I’m all for it.”

However, some women did not feel that their transport needs were being effectively met through bus services. They explained that, overall, the bus network in the surrounding area of Inverness was not servicing all areas, with many rural communities being missed. Attendees highlighted that this had a disproportionate impact on women, with women being more likely to use public transport and are less likely to have access to a personal vehicle<sup>18</sup>. This was of particular concern for women with mobility issues or on low incomes, contributing to poor mental wellbeing and a sense of isolation. Furthermore, if greenhouse gas emissions are to be reduced in Scotland, it is vital that public transport becomes widespread and reliable, providing rural communities with alternatives to personal vehicles. Overall, women in Inverness called for an improved public transport system, which catered to all needs and localities.

- “The public transport is a never-ending story. Those, like me, who rely on buses daily have struggled to keep commitments and appointments.”
- “I would love a 40-minute bus service! I live in [LOCATION] and we get buses on a Tuesday and a Thursday. That’s it.”
- “...we tend to get a lot of parents with additional support needs, and most of the women we support are single women, with multiple children, living rurally, where the buses don’t go. So, they’re isolated, their kids are isolated, they can’t get support.”

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<sup>17</sup> The Highland Council. (2024). Public Transport in Highland: Highland Council Buses. Available at: [https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/1526/public\\_and\\_community\\_transport/111/public\\_transport/5](https://www.highland.gov.uk/info/1526/public_and_community_transport/111/public_transport/5)

<sup>18</sup> Transport Scotland. (2021). 20% Reduction in Car KM by 2030. Available at: <https://www.transport.gov.scot/our-approach/environment/20-reduction-in-car-km-by-2030/>

# Community Services

Throughout our conversations with women in Inverness, the reduction in funding for third sector organisations arose. Women stated that this had detrimentally impacted a wide range of people, with vulnerable individuals being the most acutely affected. This includes those at risk of homelessness, addiction and food insecurity, with each contributing to an increasingly complicated mental health situation. Women explained that NHS-provided mental healthcare was unable to meet growing demand, with charities often bridging the gap. However, the continued degradation of third sector budgets had had a negative impact on the mental wellbeing of the community. It can be seen that the probable suicide rate of women across Scotland is increasing, between 2021 and 2022 this raised by 10%, meanwhile the rate of probable suicide amongst both men and women in the Highland region is higher than the Scottish average<sup>19</sup>. Overall, women believed that significant interventions had to be made, with a focus on reestablishing community services, to reduce the risk of suicide in Inverness.

- “Just over Christmas, there were about five or six people that I support who passed away... That’s because everything closed down, there’s nothing for them, they don’t have that support”
- “I know mental health services are very stretched and we have a high rate of suicide in the Highlands. Most of the support is provided by third sector charities, which are underfunded.”
- “There have been so many cuts with the council...it’s having such a detrimental impact on people here”

Women also highlighted the stress and isolation experienced by young people, and how this was adding to a precarious mental health situation. They believed that due to a reduction in extracurricular and social activities for teenagers, this age group commonly experienced loneliness and boredom. It was proposed that this was also contributing to the high levels of young people moving away from Inverness and the surrounding areas, with the Central Belt providing more opportunities across both employment and recreation. The current national target for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is 90% of young people to commence specialist services within 18 weeks of referral, however, NHS Highland performance sat at 77.6% in March 2023<sup>20</sup>. This shows a clear gap in provision, which can be attributed to the Covid-19 pandemic, with mental health services struggling to regain capacity levels, as well as a general worsening of young people’s mental health due to numerous lockdowns. Again, women believed that community services could play a major role in improving young people’s mental health, calling for increased funding across social activities and support services.

- “I don’t think there’s enough stuff open past seven o’clock for the young ones, they don’t have anything to do. They end up hanging out in places that they shouldn’t”
- “...no-one wants to run dances in the village hall anymore, that used to happen, and there’s so much for little kids across the Highlands, but they hit secondary and there are massive gaps. There’s nothing for them.”

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<sup>19</sup> National Records of Scotland. (2023). Probably Suicides. Available at: <https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files/statistics/probable-suicides/2022/suicides-22-report.pdf>

<sup>20</sup> Highland Health Board. (2023). Annual Report and Accounts. Available at: <https://www.nhshighland.scot.nhs.uk/media/1smjfb0g/highland-health-board-annual-accounts-2022-23.pdf>

- “I wouldn’t want to be a young person right now...trying to integrate them back into society, the community, work and school is tough...So I feel support that is dedicated to the youth is needed”

Older women have also been negatively affected by a reduction in community services. Attendees explained that the removal of social activities and social care services for older women, combined with the rurality across the Highland region, can contribute to isolation and anxiety. They also explained that this was detrimental to women’s physical health, stating that clubs and groups had become limited, preventing women from remaining active into their old age. It was suggested that when this inactivity is combined with the changing lifestyle associated with retirement, older women may lack “purpose”, feeling that their identity is significantly altered. This goes on to further worsen mental health, placing increased burden on an already stretched mental healthcare system. Women believed that a preventative model should be put in place, which focuses on effective strategies to better women’s health throughout their life-course and the community at large.

- “I think there is a need for more care in the community, particularly social care.”
- “...when you think of a woman’s life. She may be juggling everything up to her mid-30s, things then start to change in her 40s, we might stop exercising, socialising...experiencing anxieties, but that might prevent us from exercising, diet, nutrition, all of that.”
- “If we end up with osteoarthritis, our healthcare system has to look after our broken hip...and actually we could do something to prevent that in the perimenopause stage.”

In addition, women also proposed that despite the continued degradation of city centres across Scotland, these newly empty spaces could provide an opportunity for positive community developments. They explained that these buildings are commonly based in centres, contributing to easy access, and could therefore be remodelled to better suit the changing needs of the neighbourhood. As well as empty retail units, it was suggested that sites, such as leisure centres and libraries provided opportunities for community health improvement. These facilities offer opportunities across Scotland, with approximately 89% of charities delivering public leisure and culture being at risk, and 63% stating that they have planning in place in the event of closures<sup>21</sup>. These services could be reestablished through a focus on preventative healthcare programmes, highlighting the need for a thorough review of wellbeing needs in Inverness.

- “...if they re-do the centre right, make it social, make it a community space. [Let everyone] buy everything on Amazon, but then give people spaces to come together.”
- “The leisure centre model from the 20<sup>th</sup> century needs to be reinvigorated, so that it is future-focused to how we live now...Through providing access, people are pushing open a leisure centre door, rather than being pulled through the NHS system.”
- “When you look at leisure centres elsewhere, they might have a creche or childcare onsite”

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<sup>21</sup> Community Leisure UK. (2022). 89% of Leisure and Culture Charities in Scotland are at Risk. Available at: <https://communityleisureuk.org/news/89-of-leisure-and-culture-charities-in-scotland-are-at-risk/>

## Conclusion

To conclude, women from Inverness and the surrounding area provided multiple solutions to the considerable issues facing them. While the rurality experienced by many in the Highlands adds an element of complexity when accessing vital public services, it is clear that more must be done to remove this barrier. In particular, women expressed a focus on gynaecological treatment and improvements across care for neurodivergent women, through a focus on patient autonomy. Furthermore, women believed that a wider range of educational opportunities, alongside improved employment options and reduced housing prices, could counteract the ageing population seen in the area. Lastly, attendees suggested that an increase in transport options and community schemes, would vastly improve the health and wellbeing outcomes of those who reside in Inverness and the surrounding areas. To target these concerns, we have made the below recommendations, which we believe align with the wants and needs of the women of Inverness.

## 8 Key Recommendations

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

1. Improve knowledge and understanding of gynaecological conditions amongst healthcare professionals through revised lived experience-centred training. Ensuring that training received actively tackles misogynistic stereotypes.
2. Commit to reducing waiting times for diagnosis of neurodivergent conditions, as well as the implementation of the Learning Disabilities and Neurodivergence Bill across public service settings.
3. Increase pay and conditions for social care staff, to show full appreciation of the invaluable service their provide for Scottish society.
4. Carry out a comprehensive evaluation of online learning formats, with a focus on the impact had on learners and teachers.
5. Effectively resource the provision of additional support within schools, enabling good quality learning opportunities for a wider range of children.
6. Continually monitor the Short-Term Let Licensing changes, with a focus on local businesses and communities.
7. Expand council-led bus provision across the Highland region to service an increased number of people.
8. Consider how emptying high streets and publicly owned buildings can be repurposed to benefit local communities, while concurrently reestablishing funding for community groups.

# Thank You!

Thank you to the women who joined us in Inverness to provide their lived experiences and views.

Our work would be impossible without the continued support of women. We are ever impressed by the strong roles carried out by women across their communities.

We also thank the elected representatives who gave up their time to speak with us:

- Cllr. Sarah Atkin, Independent
- Cllr. Lyndsey Johnston, Scottish National Party
- Cllr. Emma Knox, Scottish National Party
- Cllr. Kate MacLean, Scottish National Party
- Cllr. Trish Robertson, Scottish Liberal Democrats

For further information or to share your views, please contact:

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