

2025

ROADSHOW

**Lewis and
Harris**

August 2025



The Scottish Women's Convention

Introduction

In August 2025, we hosted a series of roundtable events across the Isle of Lewis and Harris, engaging directly with local women to gather their views and experiences. These conversations revealed a range of pressing issues affecting women, including **employment, health and social care, education, and transport**.

Participants highlighted the impact of limited childcare on women's ability to enter and progress in the workforce alongside persistent gender stereotypes and underrepresentation in leadership roles. Health and social care services were described as inconsistent and difficult to access, with particular concern surrounding primary care, emergency response times, and the affordability of care.

In education, women raised issues around school infrastructure, bullying, and the effects of Gaelic-Medium education on community cohesion. They also discussed the limited post-school opportunities available locally, despite some positive developments with regards to apprenticeships. Transport also emerged as a major theme, with women citing poor service availability, high costs and limited connectivity as barriers to participation in work, education and community life.

This report captures the lived experiences shared during the Roadshow and presents key themes that require urgent attention to improve outcomes for women in Lewis and Harris.

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.

Employment

Across the Na h-Eileanan Siar area, 74% of the population are economically active, with the majority holding full-time job roles. Within this statistic however, there are clear disparities between the working experiences of women and men; approximately 79% of men are in work, compared to 69% of women. Moreover, women in full-time work are paid approximately £200 less per week than their male peers, and £50 less than women on the mainland¹, evidencing continued disadvantage.

When asked about their employment experiences, women in Lewis and Harris confidently identified the cause of poor work opportunities – inadequate childcare provision. For many, childcare was viewed as the primary issue facing the area, actively preventing many women from re-/entering the labour market. They explained that childcare availability was limited, with a reduction in childminding services significantly contributing to working women’s struggles. Similar issues have been identified across SWC Roadshow activities, with women on the Isle of Skye also calling for improved childcare support². This decline can be attributed to increased paperwork and bureaucracy for childminders³. Childminding was viewed as a flexible alternative to nurseries, providing women with children of all age’s childcare options. Flexibility was therefore viewed as a key requirement for childcare going forward.

- “There are even a couple I know of, well-established childminders, who have stopped, because it was too much paperwork and the pay wasn’t good enough.”
- “You need flexible childcare. I mean, there is some, but if you’re working shifts it doesn’t work. When I was childminding, I used to have a drop-off at seven in the morning...but people don’t do that anymore.”

As stated, poor childcare provision prevents women from returning or joining the Scottish workforce. Low childcare availability also impacts women while progressing within their career, with time off for maternity leave and general caring responsibilities, resulting in career gaps. This actively worsens women’s career prospects, harming their economic outcomes. Improved childcare was viewed as a clear solution to this issue.

- “...childcare stops a lot of women from going back into work.”
- “I think [childcare] prevents women from going further in their career...You get interrupted; you don’t have the space and time to just focus on your career.”
- “...I don’t have children, and part of that is to do with my desire to advance my career.”

Women went on to explain, that while poor childcare services act as a barrier to their full employment, as does engrained stereotyping. They stated that gender norms push

¹ NOMIS. (2021). Labour Market Profile – Na H-Eileanan Siar. Available at: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157417/report.aspx?town=stornoway>

² Scottish Women’s Convention. (2024). Isle of Skye and Kyle of Lochalsh. Available at: <https://www.scottishwomensconvention.org/resources/skye-and-kyle-report.pdf>

³ Scottish Government. (2022). Childminding Workforce Trends Qualitative Research Report. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/childminding-workforce-trends-qualitative-research-report/pages/1/>

many women to act as primary carers across Lewis and Harris, often at the expense of their career. While this issue can be witnessed across Scotland, women pointed to the continued influence of traditional values across the islands, as well as the lack of women representation in positions of power. Of the Comhairle nan Eilean Siar's 29 councillors, only two are women⁴, and both MP and MSP for Na h-Eileanan an Iar are men. Women who attended SWC events, explained that juggling caring responsibilities with employment made the likelihood of entering politics low. Lack of representation is strongly correlated with low participation, with equitable decision-making a key element of a fairer society.

- "...I have a full-time job, but if anything happens to my son, then my husband expects me to down tools and take care of that...what about my work?"
- "...as an outsider coming to the area, it's still quite traditional here in the thinking process, even in general life, you have that traditional role...people expect women to be home, to care"
- "It's a cultural mindset that maybe needs to change around women working. Yes, women can be mothers, but they can also have careers."
- "Women tend to still be in caring roles here, you know...when you care for others, you don't have the strength to go to the evening council meeting, to then tackle these big issues – like the lack of childcare, women's economic interests."

An additional issue highlighted by women in relation to the local economy was that of a declining population. Na h-Eileanan an Iar has experienced significant population decline since a peak in 2011, dropping from 27,690 to 26,030. This figure is estimated to continue to drop to 25,181 by 2028, a reduction of 6.1%, as a result of more deaths than births and low migration. Also, by 2028, it is projected that the 75 and over age group will increase by a quarter, while all other age groups will experience reductions⁵. This ageing population will likely require increased support, placing additional strain on health and social care services. Women pointed to migration as a way to sustain the current population, however, explained that this must be accompanied with good quality public services, childcare availability, and job opportunities.

- "When I moved back here from the city, I knew I wasn't going to get a good job. One, I couldn't get childcare, and two, there were fewer opportunities."
- "...we're saying that we need incomers to participate in public life here. If it's not children from Harris who study elsewhere then come back, it's new people like me. I don't have my parents to help with childcare, so what do I do? You know, do you want more workers here to support the population?"

⁴ Comhairle nan Eilean Siar. (2025). Councillors. Available at: <https://www.cne-siar.gov.uk/council-and-committees/wards-and-councillors/councillors>

⁵ NOMIS. (2021). Labour Market Profile – Na H-Eileanan Siar. Available at: <https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/reports/lmp/la/1946157417/report.aspx?town=stornoway>

Health and Social Care

Healthcare was raised by women on the Isle of Lewis and Harris as a concern. Residents claimed that care was inconsistent, highly dependent on locality and individual medical professionals. This was particularly prevalent within GP surgeries, with women highlighting difficulty when accessing appointments and long waits for treatment. Referrals to the mainland also added difficulty, contributing to loss of earnings and stress. Women stated that this was often unavoidable due to a lack of specialist staff. For example, forensic services are available within Stornoway, however, staff levels are inconsistent, forcing survivors of sexual assault to travel to Glasgow for assessment.

- “I know a couple of people going for treatment; one was sent within two weeks to Glasgow, they were seen right away...and the other was sent over to Inverness, but she had to wait five or six weeks, and you know, almost exactly the same case.”
- “It can be quite hard to get a GP appointment, I was waiting a week, phoning every day, trying to get an appointment.”
- “...getting forensic support; there is a forensic suite in the hospital, but there isn’t always a forensic examiner in the hospital. So, the option is Glasgow for that.”

Travelling to the mainland was identified as a major issue in relation to dentistry. Women stated that dentistry services on the island were limited, resulting in high numbers of people seeking care elsewhere. They explained that this added costs to essential services, creating barriers to care for islanders. Recently published data shows that NHS Western Isles has a lower than average dental participation rate, for both children and adults. For adults, this figure is the third lowest in Scotland, with the Isles of Shetland and Orkney placing first and second⁶. It is important to recognise that each of these areas are Scottish islands, indicating that limited access to locally provided services may play a significant role in poorer dental health outcomes.

- “My children have to travel to Inverness for a dentist.”
- “If you’re going to the mainland for dentistry, you have to fund that yourself.”

A further area of concern for women on Lewis and Harris, was mental healthcare. They pointed to a lack of mental care provision, believing that access remained incredibly difficult for those in need. Those provided with a level of care were offered videocalls, which women stated were insufficient for people experiencing poor mental health. Instead, they called for person-centred care which considered individual need.

- “Mental healthcare doesn’t exist; it’s absolutely appalling.”
- “I would say that the access to mental health provision is very poor...A lot of consultations are done with videocalls, and people who maybe struggle to attend appointments in the first place, maybe won’t get much from a videocall.”

⁶ Public Health Scotland. (2025). NHS Dental Data Monitoring Report. Available at: <https://publichealthscotland.scot/publications/nhs-dental-data-monitoring-report/nhs-dental-data-monitoring-report-quarter-ending-june-2025/>

Women went on to report worrying trends in the provision of emergency care. They explained that accessing ambulance support in the wake of injuries had become increasingly difficult, with changes to control rooms being the likely cause. Examples were provided where islanders waited a considerable length of time for support, with citizens often stepping in to provide care. Women in attendance did not blame local NHS workers, they instead pointed to increased centralisation – in 2014, the number of emergency service control rooms was reduced from 10 to three, limiting staff capacity⁷. The full impact of this change requires review, with a focus on island and rural communities.

- “...one of the shinty players broke their leg, and there were two nurses on the sidelines thankfully. They phoned 999, and it was going to take some time; I have a seven-seater, and they got him in the back of my car. So, we then took him up, and within about a mile, we passed the ambulance just sitting there.”

Linking with healthcare, women also highlighted social care. Women who spoke with the SWC, strongly condemned strict care visits within homes, highlighting that 15 minutes was insufficient to effectively care for an individual. They suggested that this approach lacked compassion, often leaving elderly members of society in isolation for long periods.

- “The constraints of the job are absolutely inhumane. I mean, if you have 15 minutes that you’re supposed to do your care in, how do you build a relationship with anybody?”

For those requiring additional support, costs can be prohibitive, resulting in the selling of family homes. According to Scottish Health and Social Care Standards, individuals should be supported to “participate fully” in their community and care should be based on “informed choice”⁸. High costs remove choice from individuals, pushing too many to enter into unsatisfactory care packages. In relation to care packages, NHS Western Isles faces continued challenge in delivery; the health board has the highest rate of standard delays of any Health and Social Care Partnership in Scotland⁹. Immediate action is required to improve the care experience of Lewis and Harris citizens, with a focus on reducing costs and revising current care practices.

- “In some cases, you’re waiting a year for care, and even their assessments; they’ll give you 15 minutes for a morning call to get you up, dressed and fed. I mean, I can’t get ready in 15 minutes, so how is an older person who isn’t as mobile going to manage that?”
- “Quite often what is happening, as well, is people being forced to sell their home to pay for their care home place.”

⁷ 1919. (2025). Control Room ‘Crisis’ as Emergency Services Rack Up £3.5m Overtime Bill. Available at: <https://1919magazine.co.uk/june2025/emergency-control-room-overtime-scotland/>

⁸ Scottish Government. (2017). Health and Social Care Standards: My Support, My Life. Available at: <https://www.gov.scot/publications/health-social-care-standards-support-life/pages/3/>

⁹ Scottish Government. (2024). NHS Western Isles: Annual Review. Available at: <https://www.wihb.scot.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Item-8.6.1-24-88-Appendix-1-Letter-from-Maree-Todd-MSP-NHS-Western-Isles-Annual-Review-BM-29.05.24.pdf>

Education

The educational experiences of women in Lewis and Harris were found to be variable. Women highlighted poor building maintenance and instances of bullying to be key issues. Due to the rural nature of life on the island, bullying becomes an all-encompassing element of life for young people, with small communities combined with online technologies, preventing respite from abuse. A mother provided her child's experience, stating that she felt unsupported by the local school and by the national reporting mechanism - SEEMiS.

All schools in Scotland are to use the Bullying and Equalities Module (BEM) within the SEEMiS system, with this identified as the most effective tool to record incidents. Yet, headteachers have raised concerns with the system, believing it to be complicated and lacking flexibility. This has resulted in almost half of schools surveyed creating their own parallel system, causing a variety of collection techniques across Scotland¹⁰. Consistent measurement techniques are vital in improving outcomes for young people, and therefore revisions to current approaches are required.

- "...a lot of our village schools are falling apart...I mean, in my village there's barely a playground because they've set up those cabins to deal with overcrowding."
- "There is some system called SEEMiS, and I was assured that my son's experiences of being bullied were recorded there, so I asked for a copy of it, and I was told no, that I couldn't get a copy"

Women also discussed the role of the Gaelic language within schools, highlighting the prevalence of Gaelic-medium education across the islands. Gaelic-medium schools aim to provide children and young people with the opportunity to become fluent in Gaelic¹¹. While this cause was viewed positively by women consulted, some did state that by separating children by language, communities became distant – eroding community spirit. Some islanders reflected on past methods, which prioritised bilingualism in all children – encouraging cultural exchange. It was suggested that Gaelic could be taught in all schools, enabling a greater understanding of Scottish language.

- "I do think on a community layer, [separate schools] create a divide."
- "It's really sad to me, the division between Gaelic and English education from day one. My daughter is in primary five, and there are kids in the same school building, at the same age as her, and they don't interact at all. I'm talking about a tiny wee school, and it's because some of them do Gaelic, and some do English."
- "Going back to pre-Gaelic-medium, [the schools were] bilingual, so they got Gaelic and English. They were all together and were all learning the same thing."

¹⁰ Education Scotland. (2023). Approaches to Recording and Monitoring Incidents of Bullying in Schools. Available at: https://education.gov.scot/media/wm0e03iu/nt-approaches_to_recording_and_monitoring_incidents_of_bullying_in_schools.pdf

¹¹ Education Scotland. (2025). Gaelic Medium Education. Available at: <https://education.gov.scot/parentzone/my-school/choosing-a-school/gaelic-medium-education/gaelic-medium-education-foghlam-tro-mheadhan-na-gaidhlig/>

Moreover, women stated that there were insufficient positive destinations for school leavers. They explained that while many high school pupils elect to attend university, alternative options were limited. Some who had attended secondary school in the area, stated that they had felt a level of pressure to attend university, despite it not being a suitable option for them. However, women in attendance did state that there had been a noticeable increase in apprenticeship options for young people, something they viewed positively.

- “As well, because we only have the one high school, if you’re not academically gifted, you’re sort of stuck, because there aren’t other options for you”
- “When I was at school, I felt like such a failure for not going [to university], there was such a push. My guidance counsellor really kept pushing it, but I didn’t want to go, I wanted to stay here.”
- “There are more apprenticeships available, and not just in the trades, so that’s made a difference.”

An additional opportunity available to residents is that of the University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI). The UHI offers educational opportunities, ranging from professional/vocational courses to Postgraduate degrees, and is based across multiple locations, including Stornoway¹². The campus on Stornoway provides people with further and higher education opportunities, enabling improved professional development. Women did state that a recent merger however, had resulted in a reduction in locally provided courses, encouraging online learning materials. While online options were viewed as a positive for those residing in remote locations, some women feared that the overemphasis on online options could erode the quality and quantity of in-person education. Women also stated that the merger had caused a level of uncertainty for staff and students, creating a mixed learning experience.

- “I know that the college has closed a lot of its classes, which is preventing those that stay on the island from getting that extra education.”
- “[UHI] are offering voluntary severance packages, to reduce running costs, but the whole point of UHI, was to give access to rural learning. So, they created it, but it must cost too much.”
- “I’ve heard about people who were going to do the courses, who have then been in disarray, because they didn’t know if the courses were even running until the very last minute.”



¹² UHI. (2025). Study With Us. Available at: <https://www.uhi.ac.uk/en/studying-at-uhi/>

Transport

A consistent topic of conversation throughout the SWC's visit to Lewis and Harris, was that of transport. Women highlighted poor access as the primary issue, particularly that of bus services. They stated that buses would not run past 6pm, preventing women and young people from participating in society safely. Access was also viewed as an issue with regards to ferry services. Women explained that during peak tourist season, islanders could struggle to travel to and from the mainland. This negatively impacted their ability to access key services, such as healthcare, and their lives more generally. It was suggested that public transport options should be improved to actively tackle climate change.

- "...there aren't any [buses] running at later times, and they don't go everywhere on the island."
- "If children were wanting to use sports facilities or clubs, then they can't access them [because of poor transport links]."
- "You can get stuck on the island or the mainland because the ferry doesn't have space for you. It took me a few days to get back earlier on in the summer, and I mean, I actually had to leave my car behind and go back for it a few days later."
- "...they need to strengthen the public transport thing even more, because that's the only way to reduce carbon emissions in the long run."

Another major concern raised around transport was affordability. Women highlighted that travel expenses, particularly the cost of flights, pose a significant obstacle. Many felt that pricing structures were prohibitive for island residents, catering to tourists over locals. Although the Air Discount Scheme (ADS) offers some relief, it was widely viewed as inadequate in addressing the persistent rise in flight costs. For instance, the journey from Stornoway to Inverness was estimated to cost £0.79 per mile with ADS, an alarming 93% above the UK average¹³.

- "...I don't know how anyone without an ADS can afford those flights. You could easily be hundreds per ticket"
- "The cost of flying is getting ridiculous. I mean, if what I was paying was a green tax, I would be fine with it, but it's not, it's going into pockets"

Beyond air travel, women in Lewis and Harris face elevated costs across other transport options. High fuel prices in the Outer Hebrides contribute to widespread fuel poverty¹⁴ and the increasing cost of driving lessons adds further strain. These experiences underscore the broader transport challenges faced by communities on Lewis and Harris

- "There are no driving instructors on Harris, you have to go up to Stornoway, and they keep putting their prices up."

¹³ Welovestornoway. (2025). Call for Action Over 'Exorbitant' SY Plane Tickets. Available at:

<https://welovestornoway.com/index.php/articles/38460-call-for-action-over-exorbitant-sy-plane-tickets>

¹⁴ Tighean Innse Gall. (2024). Affordable Warmth at Home in the Western Isles. Available at: <https://tighean.co.uk/affordable-warmth-at-home-in-the-western-isles/>

Conclusion

The voices of women in Lewis and Harris have highlighted a complex intersection of social, economic, and infrastructural challenges that share daily life on the islands. From limited childcare and unequal employment opportunities to gaps in health and care provision, education, and transport, the issues raised reflect both local realities and broader systemic inequalities. Addressing these concerns requires targeted investment, inclusive policymaking, and a commitment to amplifying women's lived experience. The insights gained through this Roadshow offer a clear direction for change – one rooted in community, equity and resilience.

8 Key Recommendations

- Increase investment in flexible, accessible childcare options – including support for childminders – to enable more women to enter and remain in the workforce.
- Encourage and support women's participation in local decision-making by providing leadership development opportunities and addressing stereotypes.
- Increase staffing and specialist availability on the islands to reduce reliance on mainland referrals and ensure timely, equitable care.
- Review and revise care visit durations, to ensure compassionate, person-centred support that meets the needs of older and vulnerable residents.
- Improve the consistency and transparency of bullying reporting systems like SEEMiS.
- Expand access to vocational training, apprenticeships, and in-person further education opportunities to ensure all young people have viable local options.
- Extend bus service hours and improve route coverage to support access to employment, education, and community activities.
- Review and reform pricing structures for flights and ferries to ensure affordability for island residents.

Thank You!

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the women who joined us on the Isle of Lewis and Harris to provide their lived experience – **mòran taing!** Our work would be impossible without the continued support of women.



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