

Annual Council Meeting Saturday 11th October 2025, The Verso Vineyard, 7 Brick Knoll Park, St. Albans, AL1 5UG, 10.30 am

Chair's Address

It is my absolute pleasure to welcome you all to the Annual meeting of the Hertfordshire Federation of Women's Institutes. Whether you are a long-standing member or joining us for the first time, it's wonderful to be together – united by our shared values, our friendships, and our unwavering commitment to the Women's Institute.

Today is a moment to reflect, to celebrate, and to look forward.

Over the past year, we've continued to show the strength of our Federation – not just through the number of events and activities held, but through the impact we've made in our communities. Our WIs have opened their doors and hearts, championed causes, welcomed new members, and supported each other through both joyful and challenging times. And for that, I thank each and every one of you.

I would also like to take a moment to recognise the dedication of our Trustees, Team members, staff, IFEs, County Archivist and all volunteers. Your hard work – much of it unseen – ensures that this Federation remains vibrant, resilient and full of life. You are the heartbeat of Hertfordshire WI.

Our national organisation continues to evolve, and we are part of that momentum – shaping the future of the WI while honouring the traditions that have brought us this far. It's a balance we hold with pride and care.

Throughout today, we will be hearing from some inspiring voices, celebrating successes from across the County, and having the chance to share ideas and ambitions for the year ahead. I encourage you to engage fully – ask questions, make connections, and above all, enjoy being in the company of such an extraordinary group of women.

Thank you for being here – and for everything you do to make the Hertfordshire Federation a community of purpose, progress and friendship.

Let's have a wonderful day together.

We have enjoyed a Meet the Farmers talk; a walk in Tring; a farm walk; Homecraft Day; a Walking Netball taster session culminating in 2 new members joining the core of active ladies participating in the Walking Netball programme; an evening gliding experience; a fun Art Class; a golf taster day and lunch at Redbourn Golf Club; a celebration of WI day, 110 years, at Audley End, a free event offered by English Heritage to Cambridge, Essex, Hertfordshire and Suffolk West Federations for 500 women to enjoy; two Speakers Selection days, the second being held on 21st October. Our Federation Secretary held an MCS workshop.

Campaigning is key to the organisation, please ensure you support the current resolution, Bystanders Can Be Lifesavers. We were very pleased to welcome onto the Board this year, Jackie Westlake OBE, who is our Campaigns Officer.

We held Interactive Workshops for Presidents and Secretaries. The latter event being organised by the two Advisers on the Members Support team. Hertfordshire has only two Advisers – Maggie Eccleston and Pam Kershaw who open, suspend and enlarge Institutes. Thank you for your

knowledge and support to our Institutes and the Board. The Adviser training course takes a few hours and can be found on MyWI if you have an interest in looking to join the team. We are always keen to recruit members as Advisers, Trustees on the Board or members to join our organisational teams. Not an onerous task as you may fear. Everyone has their own skill set to contribute, do considering joining us please. I know we have a wealth of untapped talent amongst our members. We can be flexible and offer zoom attendance.

Our new Country Treasurer is very proactive, thank you Rahat. Treasurers and Gift Aid workshops have been held. Rahat was instrumental in preparing the Denman Trust Grant Scheme for the Hertfordshire Federation. It is with great pleasure I can report our application for Bridging Our Digital Divide project was successful and NFWI have awarded us £10k. Our learning will commence with workshops run by AbilityNet sponsored by BT, a pioneering UK charity transforming the lives of people and working with organisations to build a digital world that is accessible to all.

Last year I reported we have streamlined our ticket applications to Ticketsource of course, noting not all our members have access to computers, I would like to stress Ticketsource do accept telephone bookings so our aim is to do all our ticketing through Ticketsource, and nothing will come direct to our Federation office. It offers a much more efficient service and frees up staff time.

We participate each year in the 3 Counties Quiz, the finals this year, hosted by Bedfordshire Federation.

In May we returned to Living Crafts held at Hatfield House. The stand is offered free to the Federation from the organisers and is a great showcase for crafting and promoting the organisation. Thank you to all those that made flowers for our beautiful display. Any offers of help to craft or man the stand in 2026 would be much appreciated.

The NFWI Annual meeting this year was virtual. 2026 will be a virtual meeting too. We would encourage you to participate in these national Annual Meetings, an inspiration to us all and confirm what a strong, powerful and listened to and respected, voice for women, this organisation is.

As you know the Federation only has to have one business meeting a year, to be held in the Autumn, today, and the time in the Spring that used to be dedicated to a second meeting is now a dedicated "An Afternoon with" In April 2025 we welcomed Behind the Seams with the Strictly Costumier, this event held at The Abbey Theatre, St. Albans was very well received, and we made a surplus of £2402.37. We held a second event in August when we welcomed Ruth Rogers, Joey in War Horse, who was a brilliant speaker and spoke of her pride in being the first female to control the head of the war horse, Joey. We made a surplus of £1496.20.

Our membership shows a very slight decline at 2521 members spread through the 67 Institutes in Hertfordshire, but we are confident, with plenty of interest being shown, our future for 2026 is looking bright. In May we held our first Federation recruitment meeting at The Speckled Hen in St. Albans. It was well attended. We invited ladies who had shown an interest in joining the WI at Living Crafts and ladies who had enquired via the National website. We plan to hold these meetings, quarterly, around the County. A meeting was held in September to form a new WI in Hatfield.

It has been a real privilege to help establish Herts Digi Dames Virtual Women's Institute; a space created for women who want the full WI experience in a more flexible, accessible format. Whether you join from home, abroad or just prefer the virtual setting, this group opens the door to a

meaningful connection, inspiring speakers, shared learning and the warm sense of community the WI is known for. Our goal has always been to make the WI more inclusive and adaptable to modern life – without losing the heart of what makes it special. I am proud of what we have started and even more excited about where we are headed together. Digi Dames is not a replacement for face-to-face WIs, it could enhance your membership, consider becoming a multi member and have access to interact with fellow members at events, for example the Virtual WI Festival organised for all members of Virtual WIs to enjoy. I do have to report that at our formation meeting last week we were not able to secure the 3 Officers needed to run the WI so whilst we wait to see if any ladies come forward, we are not able to officially form, and the Herts Digi Dames VWI will not continue. Please do contact me if you are able to help.

As we reflect on everything we have achieved, we must also look ahead – and we do so with both pride and purpose.

One area that requires our collective focus is recruitment. We all know the value the WI brings: friendship, learning, community, a sense of belonging and a voice on issues that matter. But if we want future generations of women to experience that same sense of connection and purpose, we cannot afford to be complacent.

We must continue to evolve – not by letting go of our values, but by being open to change. That might mean new ways of meeting, fresh activities, engaging with women from different backgrounds, or simply making it easier for newcomers to find their place with us.

Recruitment is not just a task for committees or secretaries – it's something we all play a part in. Every conversation, every event, every warm welcome can be the beginning of someone's WI journey.

Let's ask ourselves – what do today's women need, and how can we meet them where they are? How do we make our WIs not only relevant, but irresistible?

The future of the WI will be shaped by the choices we make now. And I believe that if we work together with creativity and courage, our Federation will continue to grow, thrive and inspire.

Let's make sure we are not just preserving our legacy – but building something even stronger for women who come after us.

National launched in January 2024 “The WI Learning Hub”, powered by Denman”. The Denman at Home online will continue as it is today and is free to use.

Have you, or your WI signed up to the WI Lottery? An opportunity for your WI to boost their funds. As a federation, we have our own WI Lottery you can participate in.

Are you logged onto MyWI? I know some of you struggle but please persevere and ask if you need help. It is a very informative platform with lots of relevant information for members at all levels.

Forthcoming events include our Literary lunch on 6th November at a new venue, Panshanger Golf Club in Welwyn Garden City; Christmas Dabble Day on 12th November and our annual Christmas Carol Party on 2nd December at Marford Memorial Hall in Wheathampstead.

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We have several events organised for 2026. On 26th February you are invited to join us at The Abbey Theatre in St. Albans for a special charity performance of “To Have and To Hold” – a funny, human portrayal of family life.

On April 27th we will be holding a fun fashion show with Jackie’s Mobile Boutique at the Marford Memorial Hall where our own WI ladies will become the stars of the show and you will have the opportunity to browse and purchase.

In October, the weekend of Saturday 3rd and Sunday 4th, will be our Residential weekend at Aubrey Park Hotel, Redbourn., which we are sure will be an unforgettable event. Whether you are looking to try something new, learn from fascinating experts or simply unwind in great company, this is the perfect opportunity.

I know we hold a lot of events in Wheathampstead, and this is because it is a central location for the County. If you would like us to organise an event nearer to you, please do let me know.

If your Institute has not signed up for Gift Aid, please contact the office. You don’t need to claim for your Institute if you don’t want to but can for the Federation and National which helps us. We do need to continually fund raise, by whatever means, as your proportion of the subscription we receive does not pay staff salaries and the running of County House and the Federation.

We have 2 long standing members of the Board standing down this year, Maggie Ecclestone and Philippa MacKinnon. I would like to publicly acknowledge our sincere thanks to you ladies for your contributions over many years. We will miss you on the Board, but I am pleased you are to remain on our Teams.

Before we move forward with today’s meeting, I would like to take a moment to remember two much-loved members of our WI family who sadly passed away recently – Pam Wright and Kay Fisher.

Pam will be fondly remembered by many for the wonderful quizzes she created – always thoughtful, often challenging, and full of fun. Her contributions brought joy to so many of us, and her creativity and warmth truly enriched our Federation.

Kay was a valued member of our office staff – dependable, kind, and quietly dedicated to the smooth running of our Federation behind the scenes.

Both Pam and Kay gave their time, energy and friendship to the WI, and we are all better for having known them.

Mrs. Jill Profit

Federation Chair

October 2025.