

Annual Council Meeting Saturday 12th October 2024, The Verso Vineyard, 7 Brick Knoll Park, St. Albans, AL1 5UG, 10.30 am.

Chair's Address

It is with great pride and enthusiasm that I address you today.

I have just completed my second year in office as your Federation Chair. A role I previously held from 2015-2018.

The Hertfordshire Women's Institute has long been a beacon of community, learning, and empowerment, and our collective efforts over the past year have demonstrated just how strong we are.

Together, we have not only fostered friendship but also embraced new challenges, including environmental issues and social campaigns. Each of you plays an essential role in our success.

Our Federation Teams have continued to offer a variety of educational and fun events to members.

We have enjoyed an Ideas Swapshop; an evening look at Art with our own Pam Wright; a trip to Thursford Christmas Spectacular; Christmas Carol Concert; Christmas Try a craft; trip to the farm to see the lambs; an outing to the Abbey Theatre in St. Albans to see Steel Magnolias. A super afternoon when we welcomed Adam Frost from Gardener's World to speak to us on Coronation Gardens, for food and nature, which he briefly touched upon; however, he was a most engaging and entertaining speaker, for those of you who did not attend, you missed a treat; Speakers Selection day; Hitchin and Ashwell walks. We have a core of active ladies participating in the Walking Netball programme.

We are looking to update our Team names, with a little help from ChatGPT, hence Arts & Crafts has a new name - Crafts, Culinary and Blooms.

Campaigning is key to the organisation, please ensure you support the current resolution, Dental Health Matters.

We held a Treasurers' Workshop and an Interactive Workshops for Presidents and Secretaries. The latter event being organised by our Members Support team, which comprises of just two ladies for the whole of Hertfordshire. They open, suspend, and enlarge Institutes and deal with many queries relating to the Constitution etc. Thank you, Maggie Ecclestone, and Pam Kershaw, for your knowledge and support to our Institutes and the Board. National has, however, recently changed the role, now the Team will be responsible for opening, suspending, and enlarging WIs only. The new training course takes a few hours and can be found on MyWI if you have an interest in looking to join the team.

We have also streamlined our ticket applications to Ticketsource, of course, noting not all our members have access to computers; cheques continue to be accepted. 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.

Thank you to all team members who work so hard to organise events for our enjoyment and enable us to learn new skills. We are always looking to recruit new Team or Board members. Not an onerous task as you may fear. Everyone has their own skill set to contribute; do consider joining us please.

A special thank you to Pam Wright for organising our fundraising Federation Quiz. We also take part each year in the 3 Counties Quiz. The winner this year was Houghton Conquest, 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. Any offers of help to craft or man the stand in 2025 would be much appreciated.

We organised a coach to the NFWI Annual meeting at the Royal Albert Hall in June and many others joined on Zoom. It was a wonderful day, welcoming over 4000 attendees. The speakers were Nazir Afzal, Chancellor of the University of Manchester and former CPS prosecutor, who received a standing ovation, Spice Girl Mel B, alongside the broadcaster and journalist Victoria Derbyshire and the Archers actor Timothy Watson. The NFWI Annual meetings in 2025 and 2026 will be virtual. We are hoping, as a Federation, to organise an Annual Meeting party, to stream the event at a couple of venues in the county. Details to follow.

The ladies of our Hertfordshire WIs were pleased to support the Standing with Giants charity aiming to have 22,442 poppies to represent each person that lost their lives during D-Day and the battle of Normandy. After contacting every WI Federation in the country, not only was this target reached, but the grand total was 34,471 hand-knitted and crocheted poppies. A magnificent achievement, thank you to our ladies who contributed.

A first for Hertfordshire, in August we organised a Virtual Balloon race, a fundraising event with 60% of the funds going to Great Ormond Street Hospital's Children's Cancer Centre. I am pleased to announce that we have forwarded £430.00 to the hospital. It was great fun decorating your balloon and watch it progress as it took to the skies. Being virtual, the race had no negative impact on birds, animals, climate change, plastic waste or litter. Take up from members or Institutes purchasing balloons was not as high as we had expected, but it was a new concept, perhaps not fully understood. Now you are familiar with it, ladies, we will be launching another in the future.

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 dedicated to "An Afternoon with" Following the success of Charles Hanson in 2023, this year we had a Musical Director from the West End with two West End singers and a pianist perform songs from the shows; from the feedback received it was very much enjoyed by those who attended and a surplus of £783.80 was made. In April 2025 we will be welcoming the Strictly Come Dancing Costumiers. Details are being finalised, but I can promise you a wonderful afternoon.

Our membership shows a very slight decline, but we are confident, with plenty of interest being shown, our future for 2025 is looking bright. If your Institute numbers have declined to such a degree that you are struggling, please think about a merger with a neighbouring Institute. We are very pleased to hear that after Waterford WI approached Hertingfordbury WI, a subsequent enlargement took place; Waterford and Hertingfordbury WI is now going from strength to strength.

We value our longstanding members, the backbone of the organisation, with their traditional skills but we do need new blood to take us forward and we are fortunate in seeing younger members joining and forming new Institutes. It is an enlightening time for me, I learn a lot from members as I meet them at both Federation events and attend Institutes. The secret of success in gaining new members is definitely social media as you will hear from Jackie Hulse, the President of Codicote WI later this morning.

Codicote WI were the winners of the National Federation Recruitment Award for 2024, they also won in 2023, we are so proud of them. Their membership has gone from 39 to 115 members – a 195% increase. Last year, the WI was the '24 members or fewer' winner, after working hard – and smart – to avoid suspension. This year, it has entered the next category up and taken first place.

As many of you will be aware, our Head Office is in Wheathampstead and comprises a shop at the front, offices, and a meeting room at the rear. In April 2023 we let the County Room, and shared use of the kitchenette, for a year, to a third party for a rental of £13,000.00 pa. A licence for a second year has been renewed. This income stream has helped considerably.

National launched in January 2024 "The WI Learning Hub", powered by Denman. The Denman at Home online will continue as it is today but will be free to use. In addition, to support the continuation of in-person education, but not fixed in one physical location, NFWI will be offering national grants to Federations, along with expertise and support from the National team, to regionally expand the WIs educational network based on the needs identified by members locally and in a way that can be accessed without significant travel or personal expense. We hope to work with other local Federations and are currently in discussions.

In September, the National Federation launched the Strategy Consultation. 109 years on, we remain the largest women's organisation in the country and National would like all of our input to take us forward in a way that is relevant to today to ensure we continue to grow and remain a constant in many women's lives. Please do read the document and forward your views to National; you have until 1st March 2025 to respond.

The National Lottery has recently been launched. Has your WI signed up?

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.

We have the following events organised – Literary lunch Thursday 7th November, this event is now sold out.

Speakers Selection Day on Saturday 9th November, tickets £8.00, an all-day event at Marford Memorial Hall, Wheathampstead.

Christmas Carol Party at Marford Memorial Hall, Tuesday 3rd December 2.30 to 4.30 pm, cost £11.00 to include refreshments.

Please note that due to unforeseen circumstances, and not a Federation decision, the shoe sale scheduled to take place on 23rd October has been cancelled.

Save the dates for next year - Try a Craft Day 12th February 2025, Woolmer Green Village Hall, cost £16.00. If there are any crafters amongst you who would like to share your skills, please contact County House for further information. Thank you.

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.

Next year's Annual Council meeting will be held here at the Verso Vineyard on Saturday, 11th October. We promise you something different. Dame Joanna Lumley quoted "spreads a bow wave of happiness, silliness - a unique and fabulous diva with the voice of an angel". A talk about going to Afghanistan and Iran to entertain the troops whilst under fire and avoiding the Taliban from Iestyn Edwards.

Rahat Aboobaker is our Federation Vice Treasurer and Data Protection officer and is responsible for organising our IFE training – Independent Financial Examiners - a new initiative for our Federation. Thank you, Rahat, for organising the IFE recruitment programme, to the ladies who have trained and a big thank you to Yve Robinson from Buckinghamshire Federation who ran the training for us. If you would like to sign up for the training to become an IFE, please let the office know.

Our County Treasurer, Caroline Ellis, is a staunch advocate of Gift Aid. If your Institute has not signed up, 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.

I would like to conclude by thanking our County Treasurer, Vice Chairmen, all members of the Board of Trustees, our Members Support Team, our Team members, Catherine Abrahams, County Archivist, and Beverly Hayes for their support. In April we had a new member join our team, Lorraine Stapleton as our Federation Secretary following the resignation of Hayley Tapp. We also have a new bookkeeper, Jayne Sparkes. They all work tirelessly for the Federation. Thank you.

We have 3 longstanding members of the Board standing down this year, Caroline Ellis, our Treasurer, Pam Wright and Anne Styles. I would like to publicly acknowledge our sincere thanks to you ladies for your contributions over many years. We will miss you.

I would like to thank you, the members, for supporting us at our events and making your WIs individually unique. For the friendship, warmth and support you offer each other, the talents and skills you share and being part of this wonderful organisation.

Remember the WI is:

Bold and Inspiring

Growing and Relevant

Inclusive

Flexible

The WI is here for you – every woman who joins the WI has the freedom to make what she wants of it. It might be the most important lifeline in your community – or it may be something to dip in and out of while juggling everything else in your life. However you enjoy your membership, the WI provides an opportunity for all women to choose what you want to do, not what you have to do. Whatever you choose, the WI promises to be a constant source of inspiration.

As we look forward to the future, let's continue to embody the WI spirit of education, compassion and action. Together we will make an even bigger impact, supporting one another and our wider communities.

Thank you for your dedication, and here's to an exciting year ahead!

Mrs. Jill Profit

Federation Chair

October 2024.