



Surrey Federation of WIs
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Chairman's Report to the Surrey Federation of WIs 104th Annual Council Meeting, 21st March 2022

Honoured speakers, guests and members, welcome to this, the 104th Annual Council Meeting of the Surrey Federation of WIs, and what a pleasure it is to be here in person at last, after three years as your Chairman. It is truly inspiring to see so many of you here today. It is a reminder of how, despite all that Covid has thrown at us, that you, your WI's and the Federation are in good health and in fine spirits!

It is now my privilege to present to you the Annual Report for the Surrey Federation of WIs for the period 1st November 2020 to 31st October 2021.

Despite all the challenges and restrictions that the Covid-19 Pandemic inflicted on the UK for a second year, the Federation has weathered the storm and enjoyed a successful year, both in what it has been able to deliver to its members, and in the management of its finances.

Although we were relatively optimistic as we came together for our joyful Autumn Federation Meeting, soon after we were plunged once more into lockdown. Our Christmas plans were thrown into disarray, and we endured restrictions that remained in place until July 2021 with stoicism. This meant that neither the Federation nor WIs were able to deliver face-to-face activities until August 2021. With restrictions firmly in place and for some considerable time, the Federation set about the planning and delivery of its governance and activities online. This included all Federation meetings, and a programme of talks and workshops.

November 2020 marked the appointment of our new Federation Secretary, Karen Whitehead, supported by Jeanie Wharrier as Federation Administrator, and with Katie Price as bookkeeper, thus reducing both the number of personnel and contracted hours but producing a team fit for purpose. Covid-19 restrictions forced staff home, they were put on flexible furlough, and were phased back into work as the workload increased, and full time when the Job Retention scheme ended. *The Federation therefore took full advantage of the government pay subsidy. Our staff have worked tirelessly through very difficult times to support us, thank you.

With the closure of Dorking Halls, plans were put in place to hold the Annual Council Meeting on 15th March 2021 virtually. This decision was based on guidance to ensure that governance procedures were in line with Charity Commission emergency requirements. The business of the day was followed by a thought-provoking address by Lynne Stubbings, Chair of NFWI, and Joanna Foat who spoke about the Lumberjills. This was an extremely successful event, viewed by an audience of over 500.

In conjunction with the NFWI, and to ensure that it we were in line with Companies Act and Charity Commission requirements, we proceeded to change our constitution to enable governance to be conducted online. Revised Articles of Association were approved for NFWI, and subsequently for Surrey and the Federation's WIs at an EGM on 30th March 2021, completed with one day to spare! This was only made possible by your prompt response, thank you.

The membership year, having been extended nationally by 3 months, meant that its renewal was rescheduled for 1st April 2021. Subscriptions were collected, but over a rather more extended period than usual, due to the complexity of collecting monies when personal contact was discouraged and WIs were forbidden from meeting in person. Thank you for making this work.

Despite all that Covid has thrown at us, membership has remained buoyant with a less than forecast fall, and a steady flow of new members. Whereas, sadly, five WIs have closed, with members often moving to neighbouring ones, Warlingham Village, Fairlands and the Surrey Vixens Virtual WIs were opened – the latter the first virtual WI in the country.

Throughout the year the Digital Working Group publicised the Federation's offerings, encouraging us all to take part and keep up to date. They were crucial in helping committees and members to familiarise themselves with video conferencing and maintained and updated the website so events could be booked online. They also reinvigorated the Office 365 project, that has offered dedicated WI email addresses to WI committees and secure space in the Cloud.

Campaigning in all its forms has been a crucial element of my agenda. Over the last year therefore there has been much activity at Federation level. The Resolution and Campaign Working Group has been focusing on the value of a campaign, how it affects everyone and bridging the gap between the publishing of a campaign and you, the members. This has been complemented by the work of the Climate Advocate who has encouraged members' awareness of what is happening to the health of our world and reminding us that it is not too late, and that there is still hope, through her monthly articles in Surrey WI News. The ACWW representative, has similarly, published monthly articles, to enable members to be informed of developments. The Federation notes with thanks your commitment to ACWW for your generous donations that raise money for projects.

During lockdown and going forward every effort was made to communicate with members in whatever way was most appropriate for them. Surrey WI News, viewed as a lifeline for many, went back into print from the June edition, and was permanently increased to 24 pages, whilst still also available online, free of charge. This has been complemented by the Surrey Federation E-News, an email newsletter that covers the latest Federation news and is disseminated on an occasional basis. The Federation's Social Media presence has come into its own as information was disseminated quickly and effectively, and there was a consequent growth in overall engagement.

On lockdown, our sub-committees immediately took the proverbial bull, or rather Zoom, by the horns and presented an exciting programme of events. A wonderful array of virtual talks was offered including '*Great British Bake-Off*' and '*Great British Sewing Bee*' contestants, Lynda La Plante, hedgehogs and bees, history and travel and even a virtual tour of the Hannah Peschar Sculpture Garden. Members also participated in virtual Drawing workshops, Calligraphy, Crafting a Christmas Door Wreath, Textile Work and a Yarn Challenge.

To support the day-to-day workings of individual WIs the Membership sub-committee provided support, by attending WI Annual and Committee meetings and offering social events, advisers chats and workshops, ensuring that no WI felt isolated.

At last, August 2021, and the first 'live' events were possible, a Croquet Taster Day at Surbiton Croquet Club, and a Literary Lunch with Adele Parks were swiftly followed by Willow Basket Making and Vegetarian Cookery workshops. The joy in participants faces was visible.

The diversity of member engagement was further enhanced by the Federation interest groups with Camera Club, Crafty Ladies and the 3Cs science groups, offering meetings online and in person when possible. The resumption of Surrey Serenaders has also offered most welcome face-to-face opportunities.

With the relaxation of restrictions and the re-opening of Dorking Halls in October we were able to hold our Autumn Federation Meeting, our first in two years. Six hundred members enjoyed talks by Alieda

Moore – ‘Colour Brave, not Colour Blind’ and Amanda Owen, the ‘Yorkshire Shepherdess’, alternating with performances by ‘Duo Decimus’, and alumni of the Orpheus College. The Federation and four members of the Federation Prison WIs support team were honoured with an award from Her Majesty’s Lord Lieutenant of Surrey, Mr. Michael More-Molyneux, in gratitude for their contribution to the community in forming three prison WIs in Surrey. How proud we are of them!

Without doubt, this has been one of the most difficult and challenging years that the Federation has endured. At times it has been an uphill task, with precious little joy, the shedding of many tears and a mounting list of challenges. It has at the same time also been one of the most successful as members at all levels of the organization have pulled together, demonstrating ingenuity, imagination and determination. We have all learned new skills, reached the depth of despair, but have also attained heights of elation as the fruits of our endeavours have been realised.

In a time of crisis members of the WI have always stood firm and stepped up to the mark, and in covid times this has been no exception. I am justly proud of all our members but especially those in the hall today. You who have led your WIs through this crisis and have persevered when it would have been easy to step back. Thank you from the bottom of my heart for all that YOU have done for your WI, your fellow members, your friends, families and communities. Seemingly small actions such as ours, together create large ripples that can fundamentally change the world we inhabit. I am therefore proud to call myself a member of the WI and to be your Chairman, what an honour it has been.

Carol A. Gartrell, Chairman, Surrey Federation of WIs, 21st March 2022