**Chairman’s Report – for Surrey Federation of WIs Annual Council Meeting – 20th March 2023**

It is now is my privilege to present to you the Annual Report of the Federation for the period 1st November 2021 to 31st October 2022.

The decline of the Covid-19 pandemic in Autumn 2021 heralded the return of the Federation to relative normality and what we anticipated would be a bold step into a bright new future, with face-to-face meetings, a varied programme of events both live and video-conferenced, and a return of the staff team. The year was welcomed with great energy and unbounded enthusiasm.

With the Federation finances in excellent standing due to prudent financial management, and with an extremely successful Autumn Federation Meeting under our belt, the year was full of promise. Although the retreat of Covid-19 had a positive impact on the Federation, the subsequent invasion of Ukraine by Russia and political instability in the UK, had a significant negative impact on the value of investments. In reality it has turned out to be a period of significant achievements but also some disappointments.

The budget had been predicated on a reduction in membership. However, the loss of existing members was balanced by the enrolment of new ones. This resulted in a minimal fall of less than 50 members. Although 6 WIs did close, sadly largely due to an inability to recruit officers, the advisers formed three new ones: Fairlands, Stoneleigh Sparrows and Kingston. The number of WIs therefore reduced by only 3, to 159. Our membership success is due in no small part to the hard work and commitment of you the dedicated members, committee members and officers. Thank you for your hard work and commitment that result in the vibrant and outgoing WIs you are.

Post Covid-19 the Federation believed that it was vital to invest in members and therefore both the Annual Council and Autumn Federation Meetings returned to Dorking Halls and with some excellent speakers: the forensic biologist Patricia Wiltshire, Firefighter Sabrina Cohen-Hatton, Nina Barough, founder of the charity *‘Walk the Walk’*, Lindsey Barrell and her Burlesque Bombshells and Yeoman Warder A. J. Clark. One member having cried tears of joy during the day explained that, at last, ‘she felt alive again’! It was all worth it.

As the year progressed it became increasingly obvious that the participation of members in all aspects of the Federation’s activities was greatly reduced. Attendance at workshops, events and the Dorking Halls meetings was substantially down on pre-Covid levels, and many, formerly popular events, were cancelled because of insufficient applications.

Not only has attendance been disappointing but there has been a significant fall in the number of members to take on volunteering roles for both individual WIs and the Federation. The latter you recall became critical prior to the Annual Council Meeting 2022 when, with only a week to go, because of the unexpected resignations, the Federation crept dangerously close to the minimum number of trustees required to meet its Articles of Association despite great efforts in succession planning. Additionally, in the absence of a trustee accepting a nomination as Federation Chairman, I very reluctantly took on a fourth year. Subsequently the Federation was successful in recruiting three new trustees which returned it to a workable, but still small Board.

The Board of Trustees are currently undertaking a radical revision of all aspects of the Federation’s work. All trustees have completed the NFWI’s Trustee Training programme. The Federation's Management Plan has been thoroughly overhauled and a set of twenty outcomes have been formulated and prioritised, with designated leads and time frames identified, some of which have already been achieved whilst others are in progress. Significant amongst those are an Office 365 training programme open to all WIs led by our digital administrator. Also underway is a Human Resources review, its aim, to streamline the work of the office and to reduce the workload of trustees, making these and other voluntary roles more attractive to members. An overhaul of the sub-committee structure, and the workshop and events programmes has also started.

As Covid-19 restrictions were lifted the Federation sub-committees grasped the reins and bounced their activities from virtual to reality, initially offering a fascinating programme of online talks, rapidly followed by London Walks, a trip to the Brick Lane Music Hall, a Supper Quiz and Croquet. Speaker Auditions also made a welcome return, with successful speakers listed in the informative and professionally produced Yearbook, subsequently enriching our own WI programmes. Video conferencing was however retained by the Advisers to support WIs through regular training sessions and monthly chats on various topics.

A complementary series of workshops were also very well received including Cheese Making, Christmas Crafts, Crochet, Drop Spindle Spinning at National Trust Dapdune Wharf and Making Music at Merrist Wood College. It is significant that, prompted by the demise of Denman College, the Home Economics committee has located two new venues at which to run its workshops.

The Federation has also been touched by the great generosity of a former member. It recently received a significant bursary from the estate of the late Joy Morgan, an extremely active member of the WI, for which the Federation are most grateful. We are delighted that her daughter Caroline has joined us today.

This year saw the formal convening of a Public Affairs Sub-committee. Its primary aim is to make NFWI campaigns and resolutions relevant to Surrey WI members and the public. Their work is complemented by that of the Climate Advocate who keeps the Climate Crisis high on the Federation’s agenda. Members supported a WI stall at the launch of *‘Circular Dorking’* and the beautiful and thought-provoking *‘Coat of Hopes’* was shared with members at the Autumn Federation Meeting, raising the climate agenda in a unique way. Similarly the ACWW representative disseminates information about ACWW and the funding of grassroot development projects, designed in partnership with local women. Your continuing contributions are much appreciated.

The Equality, Diversity and Inclusion agenda has centred around the NFWI policy, which has been disseminated across the Federation. It continues to monitor practice to ensure that the Federation upholds the policy and principles it stands for.

Developing and maintaining a public profile are key to our future, through both online and printed media. Social Media remains ever important, as we continue to strive to be forward-thinking. Regular posts engage with WIs, other Federations, NFWI, and outside organisations that share our objects. It also advertises Federation events and shines the spotlight on some of the great achievements of WIs and members, showcasing what a great organisation the WI is.

Our Magazine Surrey WI News continued to develop with some ground-breaking front covers and with its article dealing with Denman’s sale, the history of the Marcham estate that revealing the name and background of its new owner, and a series on bees. A welcome trend has been an increase in off beat news stories from WIs and giving free rein for reports to be submitted on all manner of subjects. Please continue with your many and varied contributions. They do much to throw light on the wonderful things you achieve as WI members.

Another opportunity to showcase the work of the Federation is by having a presence at the Edenbridge and Oxted Show. The many competition entries from members who loyally supported the show was very encouraging as was the significant number of entries from first timers. Will that include you next year? A series of a workshops and demonstrations also enabled interested visitors to learn a new craft and take home their creations. August Bank holiday weekend is definitely a date to add to your diary.

In this, my very last report to you as Chairman of the Federation, I would like to take the opportunity to sum up the Federation’s achievements over the last four years, and by Federation, I mean all of us. Every member of the Surrey Federation despite all the challenges, and there have been very many, have not only thrived but have adapted, metamorphosised, faced problems head-on, been imaginative and creative and as a consequence we have grown in scope, in reach and in voice. I am confident that, under the new Chairmanship that will be announced this afternoon, that the Federation will continue along this path, and will be outgoing, flexible, open to new ideas, welcoming and inclusive, and I will continue to be a proud member and advocate for all that the WI stands for.

Carol A. Gartrell

Chairman, Surrey Federation of WIs