



Autumn Council Meeting Saturday, 28th October 2023

Federation Chairman's Report

Lady Anthony, Madam World Chairman, Honoured Guests, Executive Members, past and present, and my Fellow Members,

This will be my last Autumn Council Report, the past three years have gone in a flash.

I was delighted to be asked to attend some of the celebrations for the Anniversary of the Good Friday Agreement back in the springtime, mainly looking at the contribution women made – something which is often ignored. I have attended quite a number of Spring Area Meetings, AGMs and Anniversary dinners and services over the past months, travelling from Enniskillen to Cullybackey and everything in between. It is always a joy to meet up with members and hear the activities and fun they get up to. I know some WIs are struggling, especially getting Office Bearers, but the majority are thriving – attracting new members and planning really good events. I have done a few talks about my travels, especially going out to the ACWW Triennial World Conference in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia which many of you will have heard about this morning at WRWD. I have given out prizes at the Music Festival, Golf Final and Festival of the Spoken Word, and continue to be both amazed and proud of the talent we have in the WI, a sentiment echoed by our adjudicators who are often very surprised at the level of expertise exhibited.

The Balmoral Show was back in full swing this year and we had a very busy but enjoyable four days. Thank you to all our members who sent in items for sale or exhibition, those who entered the various competitions, those who worked their socks off in the tearoom or on the stands, and to all the Sub-Committees, especially the Balmoral Committee who always go above and beyond.

Work continued over the summer months with meetings on Zoom with the NI Executive Office to look at the Strategy to End Violence Against Women and Girls, which included taking part in their Public Consultation. We will continue to liaise with them and are delighted to have them with us today. We also joined with our sisters in the England, Wales and the Islands Federation to see if we could organise something to take part in Good Relations Week, however, as we only heard about this in August and Good Relations Week was the second week in September, time constraints made that too tight a schedule. We are keeping in touch and may be able to do something later in the year, as this would follow up one of the Resolutions from the AGM.

In August, we held our Former Office Bearer's Afternoon Tea Party and would hope that this could become an annual event, a chance to catch up and reminisce.

I was invited to attend the Scottish Women's Institute's two-day Conference in Perth and really enjoyed listening to their excellent speakers, meeting old friends and making new ones. My favourite speaker was a lady in 1917 costume who popped up in between speakers on the first day and gave a very amusing account of the setting up of the SWI from her own point of view. She mentioned quite a few things, with the sidebar of *"as if that could ever happen!"* – and of course they all have happened! She was also outraged that someone was being paid £300 per annum – *"no one was worth that amount."*

A number of letters had been received about the changes being made to the cost of the brooches for the Homecraft awards and the Executive decided to hold a meeting with one representative from each Area at WI Headquarters to discuss these. On 21st September, eight representatives arrived, six with concerns and two in favour of the changes. There was a full and frank discussion and the proposal made that the Gold and Silver awards would be changed as suggested and the Full Circle winners would receive an award of value. It was also agreed that the option to purchase the brooches would not be given. These proposals were put to the Executive at our next meeting and passed that a bespoke, artisan brooch made by a local jeweller would be sought for the Full Circle award.

The City of Belfast Autumn Fair took place over a weekend in September and we had a stand to promote WI on both of the days. The decision to hold the Fair was taken too late to organise a WI competition this year, however, we have been promised earlier notice next year so the competition should happen then.

The WI in Northern Ireland is bouncing back after Covid, but we still have a long way to go. We are back to pre-Covid numbers, but we would really like to be growing, not just standing still. This may mean more changes in the future, for we need to become a more modern and sustainable organisation. We have set up a Sustainable Working Group to look at this and one of the suggestions was to bring in an outside agency to seek the views of our membership on the ground. This, however, could only be done if we were able to access funding which will not possible this year, but we will continue to keep it on our agenda.

We have very recently lost two more past Federation Chairmen – Margaret Torrens (1978-1980) and Jean Blair (1994-1997). I did not know Margaret, but she was Chairman when I joined the WI and Jean became a good friend. Both these ladies served us well, we thank them for their dedication and extend our condolences to their families.

My thanks go to my Executive Committee, especially Kathleen and Sheelagh, who have been a great support to me, to the Sub-Committees who work so hard to ensure that all the events run efficiently and to our wonderful office staff, Mary, Kathleen and Caroline who keep the wheels of the FWINI running smoothly. Without your help and encouragement, I would have struggled.

The Women's Institute is a very special organisation, one in which friendships which last over the years are made and I am very proud to be a member of it.

Lady Anthony, this concludes my report.

Margaret Broome
FWINI Federation Chairman

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