



The Federation of Women's Institutes of Northern Ireland

Autumn Council Meeting

The Mellon Country Inn, Omagh

Saturday, 25th October 2025

Federation Chair's Report

Honoured Guests, Executive Members, and fellow members,

The past six months have flown by in a flurry of activity, and I'm delighted to share highlights from what has been a vibrant and productive period for our Federation.

Since our last meeting, I've had the privilege of attending fourteen events, including two with our sister organisation, the Irish Countrywomen's Association. In April, I was warmly welcomed by the Monaghan Federation for their Platinum Celebrations, and in May, I had the honour of conveying our greetings at the ICA AGM in Athlone.

Closer to home, I've attended nearly all Federation events—regrettably missing only the Festival of the Spoken Word due to illness. Highlights included:

- The Women's Forum Lunch at Stormont
- VE Day commemorations at Belfast Cathedral
- Young Farmers' Gala in Derry
- RUAS President's Lunch at the Balmoral Show

I've also enjoyed celebrating with Institutes in Eglinton, Portaferry, Ballygally, Seaforde, and look forward to joining Fintona in the coming weeks. Thank you all for your warm hospitality.

In April, we welcomed our new Executive Manager, **Emma-Jane Tierney**. Thrust into the deep end at the Balmoral Show, Emma-Jane impressed us all with her energy, dedication, and innovative ideas. She is a great addition to the team, full of ideas and is already bringing efficiencies to the office.

We also bid farewell to Sheelagh McRandal who resigned at the end of August. On behalf of myself and the Executive I extend our thanks for her dedication over the past 7 and a half years, 4 and a half as Treasurer. Sheelagh's contributions were immense — from stabilising our finances and spearheading our website revamp to guiding our transition to a Limited Company. We are very grateful for her commitment and wish her all the best.

We're also pleased to announce **Hazel McKee of Gosford Area** as our new Treasurer. We're confident she'll do a great job in this vital role.

Now ladies, I want to touch on something that's been on all our minds — **membership**. We know that some Institutes are finding it difficult to keep numbers up. Early in my time as Chair, we set up a Public Relations Sub-Committee to raise our profile and help with recruitment, and they'll be giving you a short presentation shortly.

But I'm going to be honest with you — we won't grow unless *you*, our members, go out and bring new people in. There are endless ways to recruit — but the best one is simply to smile, chat, and tell people what a fantastic organisation we are!

While I'm on practical matters, let's talk about **Gift Aid**. It's such an easy way to increase our income without costing anyone a penny. If you pay tax, you can fill out a simple form that allows us to reclaim 25p for every £1 you donate. It really does make a difference, and

there's no limit on how many Gift Aid pledges you can make — as long as your donations don't exceed the tax you've paid. It's a little effort for a big reward!

As many of you know, we received a **Lottery Grant** last year to help create a Strategic Plan for growing our membership and raising our profile. The first step in that plan was the members' survey, which went out with the magazine. Every member should have received one — but if not, we have a few spares with us today. Please, please get them back to HQ by the end of the month. The results will help shape the future of the organisation, and we want everyone's voice to be heard. An independent company will analyse the results followed by focus groups. Unfortunately, it will not be possible to invite everyone to a focus group. Invitations will be going out in the near future, and I hope all Institutes will send representatives to attend.

We've also been busy rewriting the **Blue Book**, following our change to a Limited Company. Six members from across the province have been working hard on this since early September, and I'm pleased to say that good progress is being made.

Now for some exciting news — we've been awarded a **National Lottery Sustainable Community Buildings Grant**! This was quite a process, with expressions of interest, carbon literacy training, and a lot of paperwork, thanks so much for the hard work of **Sheelagh McRandal (Lagan Area)** and **Ada Elliott (Iveagh Area)** — who both passed their training with flying colours.

We've been offered **£50,780** to make Federation House more sustainable. This will cover solar panels, insulation, new lighting, new doors, and hopefully new windows. Altogether, this should cut our carbon emissions by over **4,000 kg of CO₂** and save us around **£1,800 in the first year**. So well done and I will ask Ada to stand and take a bow for her hard work.

Now, onto the **Balmoral Show** — our biggest fundraising event. Without it, we simply couldn't keep going. While takings remain steady, costs have been creeping up — hall fees, tables, chairs, equipment — it all adds up. So, I want to thank you all most sincerely for your ongoing support, donations, and hard work.

Looking ahead, the **Balmoral Ballot Tickets** will soon be distributed. The ticket price hasn't changed, but sales have dipped, and getting prizes is proving harder. If you know any businesses that might be willing to donate a prize, please pass their details to HQ. I understand that some Institutes are not able to sell ballot tickets.

And don't forget — ballots can be sold to *anyone*, not just members! If every Institute could sell just two books of tickets outside your usual circle, we'd raise an extra **£2,500** for Federation Funds. Every bit helps.

I would like to express my thanks for the team in HQ. Emma-Jane, Kathleen and Caroline who without their hard work we could not survive. They really do keep everything running. Kathleen and Caroline have asked me to remind you that **Institute Subscriptions** are due by **8th December**, and please return your **Gift Aid forms** and **Office Bearer details** at the same time. Even if there are no changes, just pop a wee note in with your payment to say so.

I am sure you have listened to me for long enough so finally I would like to say a big thank you to the Executive who have supported me over the past 6 months.

Brenda Richardson
Federation Chair
