



The Federation of Women's Institutes of Northern Ireland

Annual General Meeting

Europa Hotel, Belfast

Wednesday, 25th March 2026

Chairperson's Report

Lady Anthony, honoured guests, and fellow members,

This is my second report as Chair of the Federation and it has certainly been a very busy year — at times challenging, but also full of enjoyable moments.

Over the past year I've had the pleasure of celebrating birthdays with Portaferry, Waringstown, Boardmills, Fintona, Seaforde and Myroe — my apologies if I've missed anyone out. I've also enjoyed attending the President's Lunch at Balmoral, the Young Farmers Clubs Gala, the Ards Peninsula Carol Service and the Seedtime Service. I've been at all of the Arts events and most of the Magazine and Leisure events as well.

Ada Elliott and I had the honour of laying the Remembrance Day wreath at City Hall, and I also attended the ICA AGM in Athlone, and Rosemary and I were delighted to join anniversary celebrations with Eglinton and Ballygawley. Rosemary also attended anniversaries with Clanabogan and Mosside, as well as the Ulster Farmers' Union dinner and a farming community thanksgiving service in Clough.

All in all, we have had a lovely time visiting you, and I would like to sincerely thank you all for your warm hospitality.

Strategic Plan

It has been a busy year on this front too, but we are making positive progress towards making the Women's Institute more visible and modern in how we operate. As you know, we received a Lottery Grant to help us create a Strategic Plan and a members' database, ensuring we remain relevant as we approach our 100th birthday in 2032. In the autumn, a questionnaire was sent to all members, and I'm very pleased that around 50% of you responded. Focus groups were held in February, with representation from across the province.

We have now received the report with recommendations for the way forward. These will be discussed following this AGM, and once agreed, the report will be published on our website.

I'm aware there have been some concerns about the introduction of the database. It may surprise you to know that in our 96-year history, we have never had a fully comprehensive list of members. While lists are submitted for insurance and Gift Aid, charity and company law require us to maintain a complete and accurate membership record, and a secure database is the safest way to do this. Executive Members are currently consulting with you on the easiest way to gather this information, and I do hope you will support them. Please be assured that all information will be stored securely in Federation House and used only to support WI activities. We will also gather your information while you are here if you find that easier – please speak to Emma-Jane, Kathleen or Caroline!

And if I may say — many of us carry loyalty cards for places like M&S, Tesco or Boots, and they probably know far more about us than anything we will ever hold!

Resolutions

Ladies, you may have noticed that we haven't sent out a formal request for resolutions this year, and I'd like to explain why. This year, we've been very busy with a couple of major projects — sustaining Federation House and our Membership Insights analysis. Both are very important, and they've kept us on our toes alongside the usual day-to-day running of our WI. For that reason, we felt that this year, our focus needed to be on these projects. But more importantly, the information we've gathered through our member insights, which we'll be sharing with you, will help us to better understand the direction our members would like us to take. We must remember that our goal is to grow and modernise our organisation. That means any resolutions we agree on must reflect not only the needs of our current members but also appeal to the younger audience we hope to welcome in the future. This is vital for keeping the WI thriving. Looking forward, any resolutions that are proposed and agreed upon will be developed together with the original proposers, so we can explore them fully in order to achieve the best results.

Art Project

As part of our strategic planning we are creating a piece of art which will be used on lots of materials (promotional, website) but also as a standalone piece of art which represents the WI. The theme will be the six mountains, each one inspired by a peak from the six counties in the north. We hope the piece will symbolise the future of the organisation whilst also showcasing our pride of the past. We will look forward to revealing this at Balmoral.

Magazine

Over the past number of months we have been actively reviewing how we communicate with our members and how we can better represent the organisation to the wider public. As part of this ongoing work, we undertook a cost and content analysis of our magazine publications. This review highlighted rising production expenses as well as opportunities to modernise the magazine and make it more engaging, relevant, and accessible. We will continue this review to determine how we move forward next year, but this year we will have a Spring edition, available this week and we will also publish an expanded bumper Summer edition in June. The Summer magazine will include member discounts, more WI stories, news, and inspiration but also articles designed to appeal to both members and the wider public

Areas

As you will all be aware, we currently have 21 Areas, each represented by an Executive Member. One thing we are keen to look at is how we connect and collaborate better as an organisation. Many of these areas now have a small amount of Institutes operating and we hope by reviewing our Areas we might be able to amalgamate and provide stronger representation in the hope we can continue to grow our membership in these Areas. It would also mean the Executive would become smaller, saving in travel costs. We will communicate with you more on this as we move forward.

Handbook (Blue Book)

As you are aware, work has begun on rewriting the 'Blue Book' following our transition to a Limited Company. A small group of six members from different Institutes and Areas started this work last September, and good progress has been made. This is currently on hold while we consider the recommendations from the Strategic Plan and focus groups, as these may influence the final version. We hope to have it ready for the Autumn Council Meeting in October. I should say that we hope the Blue Book will be considered more of a guide, much of what you do at your Institute meetings should be agreed locally. We are a membership body after all and communicating with each other on what works best for you is the key to secured future success and growth.

Balmoral

It's nearly that time of year again — the Balmoral Show will run for four days, from Wednesday 13th May, and as always, this is our major fundraising event. Quite simply, without your continued support, the WI could not exist. Last year, despite some initial scepticism, the move to a self-service Tearoom was a great success, and we will continue with that this year.

However, we do have some new requirements. Following advice from the local Council, we must now register as a food business and comply with food labelling and allergen legislation, often referred to as Natasha's Law. This applies to all food that is prepacked for direct sale and is designed to ensure clear allergen information for all customers. In order to ensure that we comply, included with your Spring magazine, which will be ready for collection this week, you will find the official Balmoral recipes, as well as Fireside Quiz sheets and Balmoral Ballot tickets, which are also available today.

The recipes which you find have been agreed by the Executive and we ask that you follow these and do not deter from them, I know myself how tempting that might be! But by following these we can ensure compliance with the new regulations and hopefully continued success.

There are some wonderful ballot prizes this year, including a night's bed and breakfast here in the Europa, tickets to the Opera House, wine, tickets to the Ulster American Folk Park, carvery lunches, afternoon tea, and much more. The tickets are also on sale today so please do get in early as we hope to really focus on the sale of these this year. I do understand that some of you meet in church halls where ballots are not permitted. However, if you were able to take tickets home, I'm sure family, friends and neighbours would be happy to support you. If each Institute sold just two books outside of meetings, we could raise an additional £2,500. I know I can rely on you, as always, to support this effort and help make the Show a success.

Project

We have been invited by the Irish Country Women's Association to take part in a project funded by the Collective Soul of Ireland, titled *The Unifying Power of Heritage Crafts*. Four endangered crafts have already been selected, and events will take place across all six counties. Please keep an eye out for further details which we will post on Facebook, our website, the magazine and with the new database straight to your inbox!

Sub-Committees

This year, Sub-Committee reports have been made available on the website rather than printed, due to the rising cost of photocopying and paper.

Homecraft and Home & Garden continue to organise competitions in crafts, food and flowers for both the Balmoral Show and the Belfast Autumn Show. These are wonderful showcases for the WI.

I am always amazed by the talent within our organisation — not just in Homecraft, but in arts, literature, sport and quizzing. I would encourage you all to keep entering competitions, and for those who haven't yet taken part — please do give it a go.

Homecraft is also working on an exciting new syllabus for next year

Myself and two Executive Members and seven other members are setting off soon for Canada to attend the ACWW World Conference.

Staff

We are fortunate to have three dedicated members of staff at Headquarters.

Emma-Jane, our Executive Manager, joined us at last year's Balmoral Show and has made a fantastic impact, bringing fresh ideas and energy, particularly in communication and raising our public profile.

Caroline, our Editor, works tirelessly behind the scenes editing articles for the magazine, organising photos, managing the website and Facebook, compiling the secretaries' list, and much more.

And Kathleen, our Finance Officer, keeps everything running smoothly. She manages all incoming funds — often with very little information attached — prepares accounts and reconciliations, and provides monthly reports for the Executive. Kathleen is also the one who knows everything about our great organisation and keeps us on the right track.

Each of them also supports Sub-Committees in their work.

Ladies, I'm sure you will join me in showing our appreciation for all that they do.

Closing

Finally, I feel I have spoken long enough!

I would like to say a very sincere thank you to Rosemary, our Vice-Chair, for her constant support, and to Hazel, our Treasurer, who has taken on her role so capably.

My thanks also go to all Sub-Committee Chairs and Executive Members for their encouragement and commitment throughout the year.

Thank you all.

Brenda Richardson
Federation Chair

.....