

# “Serving members should be central to everything we do”

Diane Cooper, SWI’s new CEO, meets members to discuss the way forward

In mid-February, Diane Cooper held a series of Meet the CEO events online. No stranger to membership organisations, Diane wanted to speak to members directly, and around 300 participants signed up to hear her share her thoughts.

In a series of three hour-long sessions she offered members an idea of what to expect in the coming months, and lively question and answer sessions after each talk presented lots of praise and a few grumbles.

Of course, not all members were able to attend these meetings, so here we give everyone the opportunity to read Diane’s vision and provide a snapshot of the questions asked by members.

Diane plans to meet as many members as possible in the coming months but, in the meantime, if you would like to ‘meet’ her virtually, you can watch her in a special Q&A session on our YouTube channel, SWI TV.



“Hello everyone. As a new CEO, I’d like to talk about my plans for the future, and I want to hear your thoughts, perceptions and aspirations too. So please engage with me and we can raise topics going forward.

Our top line membership has been steadily declining for a long time, but last year saw a dramatic decrease in membership, and there have been lots of Institute closures.

There are various reasons for this decline. Firstly, the impact of COVID has significantly affected people and we’re no different from other membership organisations in that respect - the same has happened with the WI in England.

The SWI also has an ageing membership, and in the past there has not been enough succession planning to balance this, so we need to make sure we have members coming in so that the skills members have can be passed on.

Members are finding some of their local venues are closing, so that’s something I’m trying to manage strategically. Lastly, we have a constitution which burdens

people with a lot of responsibility. My question is, are these rules still relevant, or can we simplify them to make the SWI more attractive for members?

Because of the structure, I think there are many missed opportunities. The structure of the Institutes, Federations, and headquarters was designed a long time ago, when there was an army of women able to instruct women at each level. However, in this day and age, I’m not quite sure all that bureaucracy is needed. That’s something I’m going to be looking at going forward.

You might have your own views on the headquarters in Edinburgh, on Heriot Row. For those who haven’t visited, it’s a lovely big historic townhouse in an affluent area. All very nice, but actually very old fashioned and extremely costly to maintain. And with stairs into the building and within, it’s not accessible at all. I’ll go on to talk about what we could potentially do about that later.

Of course, the Heriot Row building is full of historic artefacts - items from the last century of the organisation - and I’m sure members have lots of historic items stored in various places around the country as well. At the moment these

“Can we simplify rules to make the SWI more attractive for members?”



are not curated, not protected and not preserved for the future, so we need to think about how we can do that.

In the office there are also no digital working systems and processes in place, so we need to think about making these much more digital friendly. The Meet the CEO events were the first the SWI had ever organised without paper booking forms. They took 10 minutes to set up, so we don't need loads of staff involved in doing that. Digital tools won't replace face-to-face meetings, but they can help us reach more people.

We also need to think about organisational change, because our constitution is out of date for a modern membership body. We need to diversify so that we're not solely relying on membership fees going forward.

So, we need to reduce our overheads and operational costs. And how can we do that? Well, we could sell headquarters in Heriot Row and move the staff to an office outside Edinburgh for two or three years. That gives us time to reduce our costs.

On the membership front, a lot needs to be done too. There are loads of thriving

## **“We need to steady the flow of closures that are taking place”**

Institutes out there but it's about making sure that success is equal across Scotland. We need to continue to grow the membership, and that has to be a continuous process. It's not about doing a one-off membership drive campaign, it's about continually having members join us on an annual basis.

We need to steady the flow of closures that are taking place, particularly in rural areas. And we need to think about putting plans in place, so I'm working with other external organisations to see what support is available in rural communities as well. The WI in England is looking to create development officers in specific areas and there is a possibility that funding could enable satellite areas in Scotland as well.

At the moment, the majority of our

members are white women, but we need to be able to reflect society and embrace ethnic minorities into the membership as well. We need to have a voice and we can work with external partners to piggyback on their campaigns. For example, Scotland Food & Drink is running a Support Local campaign, and they would welcome us as part of that. So, we could be aligned to that to raise our voice and awareness about the SWI as well.

So, what's the future? What's the vision? Well, I met with the board, and we talked about what the SWI could look like. We've had some ideas and we would love your feedback on this. If we wanted to, we could develop something big - a landmark - such as visitor learning centre for women in Scotland. That would be a visitor attraction, telling the story of the SWI. It would be educational and it would preserve all the history and artefacts currently held in the Heriot Row headquarters.

This visitor learning centre could be open to all women regardless of membership status, as it could then be attractive to funders. Modern



➤ multifunctional spaces could include industrial kitchens, meeting spaces, a café and a shop. It could be a versatile space for exhibitions, passing on skills, hosting workshops, getting kids in to show them how to embroider etc, and demonstrating specific crafts. As this would be income generating, an office which was part of that wouldn't cost us anything, and we would be in a far more sustainable position.

Obviously, members wouldn't pay to enter, but the public would - there might be workshops at night, or special exhibitions, and we would charge entry for those. I don't see it as being a standalone operation, but rather a key membership recruitment tool as it will raise brand awareness, give us a landmark, and be efficient for the future.

We will start discussions with funders because this would be a capital project, and they could be very interested and intrigued about what we do. One of the key things we can consider is an enterprising element as part of this visitor learning centre. So, we could have a cafe, for example, we could demonstrate members' cooking and baking skills, sell recipes and patterns, you name it, we could do it. There are lots of elements that we could tap into. If there's a shop, there's no reason why we can't sell branded products and members' crafts, and if

**“If we wanted to, we could develop something big - a landmark”**



you're going to go to a visitor learning centre, you'd want to go to the SWI because you know you'll get a good lunch, or a good coffee and cake. So, I see it as being an income generating model which is attractive for future generations and adds to society as well.

The key thing is, we need to take the members on the journey with us, because it's important that you, as members, really are part of that and can help shape what this is going to look like. For part of that

there will be an independent consultation where you can contribute your ideas and opinions. We would form working groups as you have the key skills, knowledge, and sense of history to be able to shape all of this up. We will be looking for members to get involved in checking out visitor attractions - what they look like, what you like and don't like, as well curating the SWI history as well. There will be something for everybody to get involved with.

The independent consultation team will engage with members in various ways. They'll go online, there will be meetings, focus groups and telephone calls, and it will be done by a company who will have no bias, so the process is open and transparent.

By the AGM in May, we might have an idea of what members' feedback is. Hopefully, we'll then start making some organisational changes. So, I'm asking members to bear with me until I put all the elements in place. I really want to make sure you feel valued as members, and that you come along with me on this journey, because your skills, your experience and your knowledge are how we can shape this going forward, to adapt, diversify, change, and thrive.

I will be out and about to meet as many members as I can over the next few



# Q&A

Members across all of the Meet the CEO events raised similar points. These were the most frequently asked...

## Support

**“We feel we don’t have any help from our Federation, or from headquarters”**

“I think I can be very honest with everybody, that the organisation has not been performing as it should. I’m now putting elements in place to make sure members feel supported. I’ll give you an example: I got a call from members who are struggling because they don’t have a venue, and with members using food banks they can’t afford the fees. I’ve put them in touch with an organisation which is going to help them sort out a venue and funding, and help them recruit new members. We need to make sure that kind of ‘pick up the phone’ support is available to all, to make sure you don’t feel

like you’ve been left in the dark, and are not being valued. As a member-centric person, I’m here to serve you and you need to feel valued.”

## Communication

**“Sometimes the Federations are getting passed over - we’re reading things on Facebook rather than it being passed down through Federation secretaries”**

“I agree. We have no communications strategy at the moment, so there’s a mismatch of information going to the Federations, and some will feed information to the members, and some will not, so there’s an inconsistency there. We need a proper communications strategy. We don’t have members of staff internally in our organisation responsible for communications, so that is one of the things I’ve already addressed with the Board that needs to happen.”

## Central Belt bias

**“To replace one central building with another one, possibly somewhere else in the country, will still mean members travelling long distances and facing costs for accommodation”**

“I understand that. The idea is that we can generate income for the SWI as a

whole and increase awareness. I see it as not being a standalone entity, but a central place with branch off activities connecting into Institutes across Scotland. We need to ensure members feel part of it and I’m looking for members to talk to me about that, and what that could look like. We will set up discussions groups and working groups to fathom it all out.”

## Red tape

**“People are frightened to take on roles as Treasurer, Secretary or President because they don’t know what’s involved, or are put off by the red tape”**

“Spot on. At the moment, we don’t provide training, but we should do. If you look at any other membership organisations, training is absolutely something that happens. I’m in touch with an organisation about initial governance training for Treasurers. So, watch this space, there’ll be a webinar available shortly for that.”

## Poor image

**“Why can’t the SWI reach out to a younger age group? We’re not people sitting around eating cake and drinking cups of tea, it’s far more than that”**

“There should be no age limit - members



➤ can be middle aged, younger, working mums, single parents, whatever, it doesn't matter. The fact is, we need to be inclusive, and we need to make sure people feel welcomed. But more importantly, we need to be seen as an attractive organisation, so it's about changing the perception and promoting the positive aspects of the SWI. Our members are so valuable because they've got the skills that we need to get passed on, and they have fantastic stories to tell. It's just as important that we make sure we are accessible to everybody, regardless of age, background, or race.

Our membership drive campaign is focused on a mixed age group, and we need to make sure young people know about us. I'm engaging with other organisations who have that reach to young women, to make sure that they have access to the SWI and are attracted to it. And there's a lot of work to be done with regards to education in Scotland and what we're doing there as well. I have contacts in education so there are loads of opportunities. There's a lot of work to be done on that and it all feeds into what the vision might look like going forward."

### Training

**"I've been elected to be Secretary, which is something I've never done"**

## "I really want to make sure you feel valued as members"

### before. How do I know what to do?"

"For some reason, we don't do training as a membership body, and we need to start. So, it's really important that we ensure that we actually demonstrate how people can learn and develop and be a Treasurer, a Secretary or a President, so we're going to be looking at a structure for that, which we can put in place. The training aspect is definitely something that needs to happen, so that is definitely on the list for the strategy going forward."

### Heritage items

#### **"Our Institute has items in storage which incur monthly fees, what can we do?"**

"I've been in touch with National Museums Scotland, and they're sending a curator to assess what's in headquarters, and they will make a plan for us about how we can curate that. If we can also get an idea of what members around the country have in their own areas, that would be very useful."

### Our name

**"We lost an awful lot when he took away the word 'Rural'. We need a proper identity before we go forward"**

"It's really important that we have an identity that people recognise. It was interesting that the WI in England call us the Scottish WI. One of the key things our brand has is the fact that people know what the WI is. That's not to say we'll go down that road, but there are opportunities to have a tagline or slogan and lots of different things. It's something we'll look at for the future."

### Our structure

#### **What would happen if the Federation closed and left just the Institutes?**

"It has been mentioned. I think we need to be clear on what the roles are - what is the role of the Federation, and what is the role of the Institute? We need some sort of structure, but it's about making sure that it's fit for purpose."

What do you think? If you would like to make your views known, email [future@theswi.org.uk](mailto:future@theswi.org.uk). We look forward to hearing from you

# Save the date



## NEW LOOK FOR THIS YEAR'S SWI AGM

Members are warmly invited to register to attend the online Scottish Women's Institute AGM on Saturday 28th May, from 10.30am-12.30pm.

This year's AGM will have a new format, including an update on the new SWI strategy, a guest speaker

and a membership discussion panel. By hosting this event online, we hope it will enable many more members to join in and make their voices heard.

**To book your place go to**  
<https://www.eventbrite.com/cc/whats-on-66729>

## ACWW CONFERENCE SPEAKER ANNOUNCED

We would like to introduce you to Aneela McKenna, who will be one of the speakers at the ACWW Conference in September 2022.

Having recently left the Scottish Parliament as its former Diversity, Inclusion and Wellbeing manager, Aneela founded Mòr Diversity, a consultancy and advocacy service for businesses and organisations.

Her infectious passion and quiet determination amplify marginalised voices and assists



others to understand and embrace diversity and inclusion.

*March*

🕒 25-27 MAR

Handcrafts Weekend School  
Fisher's Hotel, Pitlochry

*April*

🕒 2 APR

Soloists/Duets and Choirs  
Competition 2022

Dalbeattie Parish Church, 17 Craignair St, Dalbeattie DG5 4AX. All welcome.

🕒 23 APRIL

Ruralympics National Final  
and Walking Netball Competition

North Inch Centre, Perth.  
All welcome.

🕒 25 APRIL

National Stadium Bowling Competition  
Falkirk Indoor Bowling Club

Hosted by Stirling, Clackmannan & West Perthshire Federation. All welcome.

*May*

🕒 2-6 MAY

2022 Study Tour of The Cotswolds

🕒 12 MAY

Perth Federation Bulb & Floral Art Show  
1.30-4.30pm at The Madoch Centre, St Madoes, Perth & Kinross. All welcome.

🕒 20-22 MAY

Walking Weekend  
Fishers Hotel, Pitlochry

🕒 28 MAY

SWI Annual General Meeting  
Online (see left). All welcome.

*June*

🕒 23-26 JUNE

Royal Highland Show

Theme: Celebration of the Countryside.  
Entries by April 15 – contact Competitions Coordinator on 0131 335 6200 or by email at competitions@rhass.org.uk

*September*

🕒 19-23 SEPTEMBER

ACWW European Conference  
Golden Jubilee Conference Hotel,  
Clydebank

>> See [www.theswi.org.uk](http://www.theswi.org.uk) for updates