

Scottish Women's Institutes celebrate centenary in good health

One of nation's most loved institutions tackles declining membership

One of Scotland's most loved organisations is celebrating its centenary in good heart – with membership numbers on the up as it reaches out to a new generation of Scottish women.

Scottish Women's Institutes has boosted its membership by 300 in the past year after implementing a modernisation package to broaden its appeal to modern Scottish women.

The increase is on the back of decades of declining numbers and, says national chairman Christine Hutton, shows that the SWI is still as relevant now as it was when it was formed 100 years ago.

She says, "Back in 1917 our organisation was formed to bring women together, with a vision to welcome every woman in Scotland to join us.

"We have remained a constant in Scottish life ever since and are here to educate, to share, to campaign, to learn, to socialise, to build a community and of course, to have fun.

"Having recently taken action to remain relevant to the lives of modern women living in all parts of Scotland, we are very pleased to say that membership numbers have gone up by 301 in the past year.

"This may not sound like a huge number, but after years and years of decline this is a most positive development that shows our new-style meetings are working and that the SWI continues to have a role to play in modern life.

"The centenary is a great chance for us to remind people who we are about and what we have to offer modern women living in 21st century Scotland."

New style meetings reflecting a wider range of interests and held at flexible times and in venues like pubs and coffee shops have been introduced in the past two years, while the word 'rural' was dropped from the organisation's title to become relevant to women living in towns and cities as well as country areas.

These changes have resulted in new branches being formed, like the Deen Divas, which held its first meeting in Aberdeen in the summer of 2015 and where members take part in speed crafting, Segway racing, rum tasting, book groups and more. New style meetings complement the existing network of traditional branches where the focus is on home skills, family welfare and citizenship

Combined, all Institutes are continuing the legacy of an organisation where generations Scottish women have learned life skills, arts and crafts, taken up topical issues and made friends.

East Lothian farmer's wife Catherine Blair, who was active in the suffragette movement, recognised a need for women living in rural areas to gain the benefits of education and training in home skills, family welfare and citizenship. Her vision was shared by others and 37 women turned up to a meeting at Longniddry in June 1917, where the first institute was formed and which is still in existence today.

The network spread across the country, and the SWI stretches from Shetland to the Borders, and the Western Isles to the East Neuk of Fife.

There are currently 16,001 members attending 716 Institutes in 32 Federation areas and as well as cake decorating, embroidery techniques and floral art, meetings are just as likely to feature gin tasting, life drawing, upcycling and ukulele playing.

Throughout 2017, there will be a range of events and gatherings to mark the milestone year including the SWI's own version of Tea in The Park – tea parties which will take place in each Federation area on the same date, Sunday 2 July.

An exhibition in Edinburgh from 5-18 April will reflect the changing times of both the organisation and society and will feature artefacts, handcrafts and archive materials including vintage kitchenalia, handmade baby clothing, rural chinaware and rarely seen archive materials. While rolling back the years with vintage and retro displays, there will be latest craft demonstrations too. This is open to the general public as well as members.

Also planned is a ceremonial tree planting and garden party; the creation of craft banners and a new recipe book featuring recipes from celebrity chefs as well as the SWI's own demonstrators. An Eryngium sea holly plant has been cultivated and named after SWI founder Catherine Blair for the centenary year.

For more details of how to find your nearest Institute, or advice on how to set up a new one, visit www.theswi.org.uk or go to its Facebook pages at

<https://www.facebook.com/ScottishWomensInstitutes>

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Photo: National chairman Christine Hutton.

For more information, please contact:

Esther Green

Senior Account Executive

Tricker PR

O: 01224 646491

M: 07803 922297

E: egreen@trickerpr.com

Notes to Editors:

Scottish Women's Institutes - The Scottish Women's Institutes (SWI) is one of the largest educational organisations for women in Scotland, with 716 branches spread across the country.

The organisation gives women of all ages the opportunity to learn new skills, build on existing ones and make new friends. Every Federation works to enhance local community life and constantly strives to preserve the quality of Scottish living.

The SWI was formed in 1917 as the Scottish Women's Rural Institutes with two main aims, to advance the education and training of those who live and work in the country, or are interested in country life, in home skills, family welfare and citizenship and to promote the preservation of Scotland's traditions and its rural heritage.

Scottish Women's Rural Institutes is a registered Scottish charity also known as the SWI Charity No SC011901.

www.theswi.org.uk