

Scottish Women's Institutes cast on to keep the homeless cosy this Christmas

A cosier winter is in sight for homeless people across Scotland this winter, thanks to the Scottish Women's Institutes (SWI) picking up their knitting needles and casting on in support of a national campaign to help make a difference to the lives of Big Issue vendors.

As Scotland's largest women's organisation, and with many members talented sewers and knitters, the SWI is throwing its weight behind The Big Issue Foundation's Big Knitathon to ensure that this year's effort is the biggest and best to date.

Throughout November, the women will gather to knit garments, raise funds and hold events, all of which will benefit homeless people in Scotland. And, in a powerful message to get others involved, they are providing two Big Knitters –expert knitters who will help promote the Big Knitathon by attending events, posting tips online and answering knitting queries.

Although the SWI is no stranger to supporting important issues and worthy causes, it's the first time that the 17,000 member organisation has been involved in the Big Knitathon – and members are determined that their backing will make a big difference to the lives of people who have become homeless. The SWI will be working alongside Hobbycraft, another key supporter of the campaign, with all 83 stores taking part nationwide.

As the leading ladies and resident 'Big Knitters' for the campaign, mother and daughter Anne (73) and Jane Muirhead (47) are determined to encourage all members – from novice to seasoned professional – to keep their knitting needles by their side for the month of November.

Gargunnoch SWI member and Stirling Federation chairman Anne says, "For as long as I can remember we, as an organisation, have gone above and beyond to support local and national causes. We're passionate about making a difference and helping others in need.

"I've been a member for 40 years and I still love the fact that when we work together, we achieve extraordinary results. I, and many of my fellow members, were taught how to knit in primary one and so have had the best part of 70 years to perfect the skill – and practice we do!

"This is a fantastic cause with very worthy recipients so between our scarfs, gloves, blankets and hats, we'll make sure The Big Issue vendors don't feel a chill this winter."

The Big Knitathon is an annual campaign to encourage knitters across the country to create clothing for the vendors, sell the finished articles to raise funds, or hold events with all proceeds going to The Big Issue Foundation. Over the last three years over 2000

knitters have got their needles out for the Big Knitathon and raised over £22,500 for the campaign.

For The Big Knitathon, SWI members are being encouraged to teach novice knitters, share skills, donate knitted goods, organise fundraising events and document their knitting journey online through social media.

They are also encouraged to attend the nationwide Hobbycraft event on Saturday 14th November. Held in all 83 stores across the UK, the event will give members a chance to knit together, share skills, share patterns and enjoy a cake or two – all in aid of Scotland's Big Issue vendors.

Stephen Robertson, CEO of The Big Issue Foundation, says, "Winter is an especially difficult time for our sellers, especially when the end of the working day doesn't provide any respite from the harsh conditions. The Big Knitathon enables everyone to help make our sellers' days and nights easier by buying, selling or donating hand knitted items. This year we're delighted to have support from the SWI, and know that the warmth of their fundraising and knitting support will be felt by our sellers through the winter's chill."

Working outdoors in the freezing winter months, vendors will be protected from the chilling Scottish winds and cold temperatures with cosy knitted hats, scarves and fingerless gloves. Knitters can also donate individual squares that will then be made into patchwork blankets providing some extra warmth during the coldest months of the year.

Joining in with the Big Knitathon is easy. SWI members can submit knitted goods or raised funds to their nearest Hobbycraft store throughout November. Simply register for free online and you will be sent a fundraisers pack. www.bigissue.org.uk/event/big-knitathon-2015. To find out more about the Scottish Women's Institute visit www.theswi.org.uk.

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For further information contact:

Esther Green

Tricker PR

Office 01224 646491

Mobile 07803 922 297

Email egreen@trickerpr.com

Captions:

Image 1 – 2: (L-R) Big Knitter Anne Muirhead (73), Big Issue Vendor Fergie McIver (70) and Big Knitter Jane Muirhead (47) at the Falkirk Hobbycraft store.

Image 3 – (L-R) Big Knitter Anne Muirhead (73), Big Issue Vendor Carmen Marlena Stoian (47) and Big Knitter Jane Muirhead (47) at the Falkirk Hobbycraft store.

Notes to editors:

Scottish Women's Institute - The Scottish Women's Institutes (SWI) is one of the largest educational organisations for women in Scotland, with over 747 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 back 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. The organisation will celebrate its centenary year in 2017.

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

www.theswi.org.uk

The Big Issue Foundation - The Big Issue was founded in 1991 as a social enterprise, producing a weekly magazine which can be bought for £1.25 and sold for £2.50 by people who are homeless, vulnerably housed or at risk of homelessness. The Big Issue Foundation is the charity founded in 1995 to deal with the more holistic needs of The Big Issue's vendors. It is a small but national charity and they worked with over 2200 individuals last year alone.

The mission of The Big Issue Foundation is to connect vendors with the vital support and personal solutions to enable them to rebuild their lives; to find their own paths as they journey away from homelessness. The charity relies almost entirely on voluntary donations, fundraising campaigns and partnerships to fund its vital services.

www.bigissue.org.uk www.bigissue.com