



Rachel Jones of Manchester WI, Lancashire Federation (far right) founder of the Camera Club, goes on location with fellow member, Emma Darbyshire



**‘The key to success with sub-groups is to be very friendly and approachable and have a wide range of different clubs’**



**BRIGHTON BELLES**

# Spin off to success

Members are broadening their skills by pursuing special interests in a range of sub-groups springing up across the country

Interview by LUCY COLLINS Photography MARK WAUGH

**W**hether your passion is for books, burlesque or bowling, setting up a smaller group within your WI to pursue new interests is a great way to squeeze further mileage out of your membership.

More confidence and more exercise are just some of the benefits enjoyed by The Burlesque Bombshells of New City Girls WI, Essex Federation. Lindsey Barrell founded the group two years ago and their weekly meetings attract 15 regulars who frequently perform in public: ‘We’re an eclectic mix of women who range in age from our late 20s to early 60s and we’re all shapes and sizes. Our routines are true to the origins of burlesque with comedic

overtones in the spirit of the *Calendar Girls*, but we stay fully clothed apart from removing the odd jacket or glove.

‘None of us had ever performed in public before and it’s been a huge confidence boost – a number of ladies have said it’s changed their life. I can relate to that – as my children were getting older I was spending a lot of time on my own and I was thinking “Is this it?”’

New City Girls’ monthly meetings are held in Chelmsford Cathedral – it’s the only venue locally that’s big enough to fit in all 350 members.

They have a mind-blowing 37 subgroups, covering everything from craft and walking to Out of the Box, which offers coastal foraging walks and white-water

rafting. There is even a club for mums and toddlers.

Lindsey says: ‘It’s such a huge WI, you couldn’t survive without the smaller groups. I’ve made some brilliant friends and I’m part of a community within a community.’

‘Just do it,’ is her advice to anyone yet to take the plunge. ‘I rented a local hall for our meetings and my WI was brilliant at pointing me in the right direction and giving me access to its public-liability insurance. I charge a nominal fee of £3 to cover costs and have found it so rewarding. We are having an absolute blast.’

Manchester WI, Lancashire Federation has six thriving sub-groups. President Lex Taylor’s advice is to be clear about responsibilities from the outset. ‘A member asks permission to set up a group. As a Committee our approach is *you’ve* got to run it, but keep us in the loop. We send them an attendance register and set them up as an administrator on our WI’s Facebook page so they can publicise their activities.

‘Our advice is keep the communication centralised: it needs to be coming from the same social media. Having multiple accounts means people don’t know where to turn. We give the women who want to run these clubs free rein and they report back to the Committee so we can include information about them in our monthly mailer. Because we have 134 members it’s a really good way for people

to get to know each other on a deeper level.’

The Bookish Broads, a monthly reading group, is the most popular with about 20 regulars, and the others cover craft, blogging, allotments, culture and photography.

Rachel Jones set up the Camera Club to pursue her love of photography with fellow members. ‘It gets people out and about taking pictures. We’re an ad-hoc group and meet every other month. You don’t need a fancy camera and there is no charge.

‘We took part in The Grid Project, a mass participation event to provide a photographic map of Manchester; our latest outing was along the Irwell Sculpture Trail. Marketing it through our WI’s Facebook page makes it easy to organise. I announce it at the main meeting and then put the details online.’

The blogging group has enjoyed talks from lifestyle and fashion bloggers, and the Culture Club had a screening of the film *Suffragette*, which attracted 100 members.

The newest addition is the allotment group. Eleanor Lambert is one of the three members who run it: ‘We’re a city WI so many of us don’t have outdoor spaces. This piece of land is somewhere our members can come together to enjoy peace and quiet.

‘None of us is an expert horticulturist so it’s a chance to learn,’ she explains. ‘We’re growing potatoes, onions,

**Above: Stitch & Bitch crafters from Brighton Belles WI, East Sussex Federation, won a prize at the South of England Show with their knitted flowers – designed to draw awareness to female genital mutilation**



**Left and above: the Burlesque Bombshells of New City Girls, Essex Federation use their publicity skills to promote their dance routine – a boost in confidence for all ages**

**Below: Old Coulsdon Cupcakes WI, Surrey Federation, has groups that will appeal to ramblers, readers, diners, coffee drinkers and culture lovers**

garlic and celery and, as we become more proficient, we can add to these. ‘One day we’d like to donate our crops to a local soup kitchen or to help support our nominated charity, though we don’t have enough veg to do this yet.’

To encourage new members they hold regular barbecues and ‘call to arms’ events they promote online.

Sub-groups are a big attraction for prospective members, says Debbie Baxter, President of Old Coulsdon Cupcakes WI, Surrey Federation. With two book groups, a dine-out club, ramblers group, a coffee and a culture club, there’s a lot on offer.

‘Because we’ve got such a big membership (135) they’re able to make their friends through smaller groups,’ says Debbie. ‘I seem to have found myself attending them all – I’m a bit of a WI groupie but it’s nice to go along and be one of the girls rather than organising things all the time. We have such good fun. We’re really well supported and I feel very privileged.’

‘The key to success is you’ve got to be friendly and approachable, not cliquey, and have a variety of different clubs so there’s something for everybody.’

Denise Moores, President of Harpenden Village WI, Hertfordshire Federation, says: ‘The beauty of the sub-groups is that they bring together young and old. We have two walking groups, one catering for stronger walkers and another for those less physically able. They set off together before separating, then meeting up for a pub lunch. We try to be inclusive and encourage new members to join these groups – with 80 members at our monthly meeting, it’s a way of getting to know others.’

Crafts and walking are the most popular special interests, but sub-groups offer the space for as many niche activities as you can imagine. Bognor Regis WI, West Sussex Federation, runs a SCIFFLe group (Science Fiction and Fantasy Ladies), ‘one of our most active groups,’ says President Lesley Guppy. Activities range from cinema visits and competitive games of *Star Trek* Scrabble to visiting the London Science Museum.

Stitch & Bitch crafters from Brighton Belles WI, East



Sussex Federation, drew awareness to female genital mutilation (FGM) by knitting flowers for display, which won a prize at the South of England Show.

Co-President Laura Callaghan Grooms reports: ‘The judges said that our entry had the wow factor and they were impressed that we had 15 people collaborating. We meet monthly at members’ houses and we’re busy planning our next collaborative piece.’

Salford Angels WI, Lancashire Federation, has a sub-group devoted to promoting the aims of the Time to Talk about Organ Donation campaign.

President Suzanne Rigg says: ‘Greater Manchester has a low sign-up rate and it is important that we look at this issue. Nine of us have done ambassador training [via NFWI Public Affairs]. We go out into the community and take stalls at events so that we get to talk to a lot of people. Then they start asking questions and we can destroy the different myths about organ donation.’

The potential topics are limitless – whatever your passion: Borough Belles WI, Kent-West Kent Federation, cool down with their lido club, visiting different open-air pools across London (they are looking forward to meeting at the Serpentine in Hyde Park); Social Lites WI, Cheshire Federation, satisfy their spice cravings at a curry club, visiting restaurants, and Bromley Heath WI, Avon Federation, pursue their dreams through their (You Only Live Once) club, trying out a range of activities.

Whether you are into fashion, foraging or fishing, why not share your interest with fellow members? [WI](#)

**‘Although craft and walking groups tend to form the mainstay, sub-groups offer the space to enjoy other niche activities’**