

WIs in Prisons



Setting up a prison WI

Setting up a prison WI must be considered at length and should be championed at the highest level in the prison; usually by the Prison Governor or another senior member of staff. Substantial investigation and discussions are needed to ensure that both the prison and the federation are happy with the arrangements before moving forward. Membership can be granted as a privilege for good behaviour.

Membership and Funding

Funding needs to be found and secured for every member in a prison WI and this should be undertaken by the prison itself. As the population of prisons is transient, it is necessary to agree a 'block' number of memberships that can be filled as turnover dictates. This block number of members is added on to the MCS with no personal details included, and, rather than sending individual mailings, it is agreed that one package of the required number of magazines is sent to the prison and distributed to the current members.

WI Officers

WI Officers are regular WI members who make up the committee of charity trustees who effectively run their individual WI. The roles of Officers in prison WIs are usually taken on by staff members or supportive volunteer associates attached to the prison, but can also be filled by the residents, depending on circumstances and decisions made by the prison governors. It is recommended that the president of the prison WI be a member of staff or the role be shared with a member of staff as this ensures continuity.

Officers of prison WIs who are staff members have been very enthusiastic and have even joined WIs in their local community, which has really benefitted their understanding of how to run a successful WI. It is recommended to encourage the staff of the prison who are the officers of the prison WI and/or overseeing the running of the prison WI to go and visit a local WI in their community. In this way they will be able to better understand more about the WI organisation and what it does.

Strictly legally, committee members of a WI are charity trustees and therefore, a prisoner status may be in conflict with that of being a trustee. However, the NFWI is happy to work with the prison authorities to work out the best arrangements for a particular prison situation.

Activities

Standard procedure dictates that Prison WIs will not be taking part in the normal activities of 'standard' WIs, and therefore will not be fundraising or using the WI name in any external activities. Therefore the scope for inappropriate behaviour of trustees or adverse effect on the reputation of the WI is so limited that the risk is considered to be minimal. However, in certain circumstances prison WIs might engage in fundraising and attendance of external according to the security measures put in place by the prison. Prison WIs are not constituted as charities under the WI constitution, but the NFWI is happy to find an appropriate compromise to help groups of women in prison to be called prison WIs and take advantage of appropriate WI activities because the trustees believe that the WI with its self-governing structure is a very effective way of helping women in prison learn new skills and help them when in resettlement.

Meeting time and venue

The timing of the meetings is a really important consideration to ensure as many women as possible are able to attend, and get the most out of the activities on offer. It may be useful to hold meetings within a more formal education/activity slot to increase the number able to attend.

Keys to a successful prison WI:

- **Enthusiastic and robust WI Advisers**
The WI Adviser team should have the necessary experience and sensitivity to deal with the varying issues as and when they arise. Establishing a prison WI takes time and dedication, and WI Advisers should be proud of the difference they are making to its members. The formation and ongoing success of a WI in a prison is also dependent on the support of the federation and its WI Advisers.
- **Support of the Prison Governor and other staff**
The support and cooperation from prison staff is absolutely essential to enable a WI to run smoothly in such an environment.
- **Staff standing as WI Officers**
The cooperation of staff members who take on the responsibility of becoming WI Officers provides regular and essential contact with WI Advisers and the local federation office.

Alternatives

If it is decided that perhaps a WI in particular is not the best way forward, the federation may consider investigating alternative options, such as inviting local WI members to visit prisoners on a regular basis, again working closely with the prison authorities.

I hope this information helps, and encourages more WIs and Federations to get involved. If you have any further questions, please email Juliet Isherwood at j.isherwood@nfwf.org.uk.