



SISTERHOOD GROUPS GUIDELINES

What is a Sisterhood Group

The Sisterhood group concept is a simple one and draws on an existing model operated by many WIs – the sub-group. These groups, which are aligned to WIs or federations but sit outside the formal monthly membership meeting, are a way of undertaking other activities with a wider audience and within the organisation’s charitable objects. Whilst ‘membership’ must legally be restricted to those who were registered female at birth, sub-groups and other activities can, with the consent of the members of a WI, be opened up to non-members. The strength of adopting this approach is that we can build on the experience of activity that WIs and federations are already delivering and offer flexibility to create these groups based on local need and interest.

These groups must be open to all and will offer opportunities for all people, including transgender women, to come together to socialise, learn from each other, and share their experiences of living as women. However, to restrict attendance to only those living as women would be to expose our charities to discrimination claims.

We anticipate that the Sisterhood Groups will have a wide appeal in communities for all those interested in supporting and empowering women, and it is highly likely that this will support WIs to reach a wider range of women and representatives from your wider community.

How to set one up

In line with the WI governance structure, Sisterhood Groups must be attached to an established charity (either a WI or a federation) and set up with the support of WI members. You should consult with your WI members about establishing the Sisterhood Group as you would normally when setting up a new sub-group (this includes whether the group will be established and the principles of the group being open to non-members). We strongly suggest holding a vote if necessary to ensure you have support from your WI members. Unless you do otherwise in your WI, this can be done by a simple majority vote i.e. if you have 20 WI members in a WI and 11 vote yes and 9 vote no on any motion put to them, then it will be carried.

You can set up a group covering the area reached by your WI. You can also create a group covering a wider area, such as multiple WIs, but any Sisterhood Group will still need to be linked to one WI. This is so the finances can run through the WI books and is attached to one charity. In this scenario, the WI who ‘owns’ the Sisterhood group will require a majority of its WI members to vote for it to be set up as it will be officially linked to their charity. WI

Members need to vote on setting up the group even if they themselves don't choose to attend.

In terms of activities, as with other sub-groups, you can decide on what activities your group will deliver, where it will be delivered, whether in person or on-line, and how often it will be delivered.

Sub Groups

Sub-groups are groups run by WIs that are additional to the core membership meetings. Some sub-groups are open only to members and are offered as a membership benefit. Other sub-groups are open to both members and non-members. The running of sub-groups is up to individual WIs. Whether sub-groups are for WI members only, or are open to non-members should be decided locally, in consultation with the members of that WI.

In the case of the Sisterhood groups, when one of the objectives of the project is about inclusion, the assumption in creating one of these groups will be that they are open to all. So, when the WI members vote to have a Sisterhood group (as outlined above) this will include the fact that they are open to all.

Sub-groups sit outside the WIs constitutional obligation they are not a formal part of the membership offering as per the constitution, which is why some WIs have dozens of sub-groups, and some don't have any.

Sub-groups must also be self-financing.

Open Meetings, Guests and Visitors

Arrangements for open meetings, guests and visitors are decided locally by WIs in consultation with their members.

It is important that WIs focus first on what members receive and ensure they receive a protected membership offer which meets the charity's requirements (as laid out in the constitution) and offers value for money.

The Constitution states that WIs must provide 11 meetings a year for members. Although we know many WIs welcome visitors to different meetings, and may have some fully open meetings, with the agreement of WI members, it is very important for each WI to protect the member experience and have a clear member benefit, which is offered based on eligibility for membership. In this instance potential members need to be considered as well, as open meetings could put people off joining.

With regard to visitors, the WI Handbook states:

It is up to each WI whether they wish to charge a visitors' fee and, if so, the amount. If a fee is charged, this may have Gift Aid implications as meetings would then count as a benefit for these purposes. Alternatively, visitors can be invited to make a donation to the WI upon visiting. For more information on this, please see the NFWI Gift Aid guidance. It is recommended that an individual is permitted to attend as a visitor up to three times before she is obliged to pay the subscription fee and become a member, although this is the WI's decision. WIs need to be mindful of protecting the member experience when considering if and how they open meetings to visitors.

There is no formal definition of 'visitors' and 'guests' and WIs may use these terms differently. We usually refer to 'guests' as anyone who attends an 'open meeting', whereas 'visitors' is more about women who are eligible for membership seeing if they wish to be members. As stated in the handbook, visitors usually visit up to three times before joining. However, as above, this is up to individual WIs to decide.

We would not recommend opening all WI meetings to guests. This is because it could blur the line of member benefit. It may also put women off from joining.

If WIs are opening some of their meetings to guests, they must bear in mind two things particularly – firstly, they must be able to demonstrate that they maintain a clear member benefit (for example, keeping the majority of their meetings closed to members and only opening those with a wider appeal). Secondly, they must adhere to the principle of 'open to all', which means as an example that you would need to apply the same rules to anyone who wished to attend.

Why do the Sisterhood Groups need to be open to all?

The groups must be open to all in order to avoid any legal risk of discrimination.

Whilst the group is open to all, the groups will have a clear ethos (reflecting the NFWI ethos) and organisational belief: that transgender women are women. *Anyone* keen to be part of the group and willing to support this ethos is welcome to attend, and you are able to ask people to leave if they are unable to be supportive. This is why we have created the Facilitator role, so that at least one of those running the group can support this. We believe these groups may be a way to reach out to communities of women who share this ethos, but who may not be able to engage with our traditional membership model.

Age of Majority

If a person under the age of majority shows interest in joining a Sisterhood Group, please contact the NFWI for advice as the safeguarding arrangements will be different.

Sisterhood Group Facilitator

It is important that each of the Sisterhood Groups, whether at WI or federation level, has an identified facilitator or facilitators (the role can be shared). The facilitator will co-ordinate the group's activities and their role will be integral in maintaining the ethos of the group.

Each Sisterhood Group must have a Facilitator/s from the host WI, however, as a Sisterhood Group establishes itself, a Facilitator can be identified from among the attendees of the Sisterhood Group to work alongside the WI Facilitator.

The NFWI will be offering support for this volunteer role to help establish it within in each Sisterhood Group. A role description and training will be available.

Finance

The Sisterhood Groups will be aligned with WIs, and the Income and Expenditure should be accounted for through the WI accounts in the same way as all other WI sub-groups that are open to non-members. That means cost and the recharges will both go through the books,

and the effect will be zero. The only exemption is if the sub-group meets in a venue such as a pub, café or garden centre, where members pay individually for refreshments and so on.

With regard to Gift Aid, it will depend on whether the non-members are charged a higher fee than the WI members. If they are, then the difference should be treated as benefit to WI members. This is in line with how visitors' fees are currently treated for Gift Aid purposes.

WIs cannot use WI funds to pay for venue hire for the Sisterhood Groups. However, if the WI owns a hall, they may allow Sisterhood Groups and other sub-groups to use it if available, depending on the financial position of the WI and how it ordinarily approaches sub-group costs.

There are some activities that you could organise which would have little financial outlay, especially as you establish a Sisterhood Group e.g you could organise a walk, visit a local museum, gallery or place of local interest, meet in a café, pub or garden centre or organise a scavenger hunt. There is flexibility as to how you set up a Sisterhood Group based on your own WI and the needs of your community.

A WI can do some fundraising to support the establishment of a Sisterhood Group and further information can be found in the WIs Fundraising Guidelines on My WI. It may also be possible to secure a grant for the Sisterhood Groups, there will be lots of local funding pots that you may be able to tap into. It may be worth approaching your local authority or voluntary council to see what information they have, or your local supermarket or local businesses, and there are also some national pots you could explore. Here are some useful links:

[Funding Finder - Get Grants](#)

[Home | The National Lottery Community Fund](#)

[Greggs Foundation | Community funding](#)

[Grants - Community Foundation Wales](#)

[MyCommunity - MyCommunity](#)

National Association for Voluntary and Community Action (NAVCA) <https://navca.org.uk>

The National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/#/>

UK Government [Home - Find a grant](#)

Insurance

Your insurance should cover the activities of the Sisterhood Groups as they would any sub-group, however, if you're not sure, please contact your insurance provider.

Sisterhood Groups and Federations

Sisterhood Groups can be formed by federations, however, federations are encouraged to first look at what their WIs wish to offer in terms of a sisterhood provision before establishing over-arching federation Sisterhood Groups. We feel that a more localised provision may be more appropriate and that by establishing a federation-wide group straight away may inhibit the development of WI-level groups.

If a federation did want to set up a Sisterhood Group, the federation board would need to vote for it as they would for all events and activities provided for the members throughout the year.

GDPR

If any personal information is held, data protection guidelines must be followed. This could be for example, if a What's App group is formed, the administrator should seek consent from the Sisterhood Group attendees that they give permission for their name/mobile number to be added to the WhatsApp group for Sisterhood activities only. If no information is held then permission is not required, however the group should be aware of data protection principles. Please refer to the Data Protection FAQ's on My WI.

Why do we use the term 'Sisterhood'

The terminology is a way of reflecting that in these groups the focus will be on sharing experiences of being a woman and that the groups include transgender women. The word comes from the word most regularly used by our transgender members to describe their experience of being part of the WI.

Promoting your Sisterhood Group

The NFWI will provide some simple wording to support you in promoting your Sisterhood Group locally, but we encourage you to promote your group using your usual communications tools as you would any other group.

Useful Links

[My WI | Home](#) has a lot of useful information including:

Equality, Diversity & Inclusion policy

Safeguarding Policy

WI Handbook

Financial Guidelines

WI Fundraising Guidelines

NFWI Complaints Policy

Data Protection

NFWI Code of Conduct