

National Federation of Women's Institutes updates membership rules in light of Supreme Court judgment

In April, the Supreme Court in the UK ruled that the legal definition of a woman under the Equality Act (2010) refers only to biological sex. Since the ruling, we have reviewed our long-held practice and membership policy to ensure we are compliant with the law. Today (Wednesday, 3 December), we have announced we can no longer legally offer formal membership to transgender women in light of this judgment. However, we will bring forward programmes to continue to extend fellowship, sisterhood, and support to transgender women. Read our full statement below from CEO Melissa Green:

It is with the utmost regret and sadness that we must announce that, from April 2026, we can no longer offer formal membership to transgender women. As an organisation that has proudly welcomed transgender women into our membership for more than 40 years, this is not something we would do unless we felt that we had no other choice.

To be able to continue operating as the Women's Institute - a legally recognised women's organisation and charity - we must act in accordance with the Supreme Court's judgment and restrict formal membership to biological women only. However, this change is only in respect to our membership policy and does not change our firm belief that transgender women are women.

We know that many of our members will find this decision extremely painful. We have been actively seeking alternative ways - outside of formal membership - of continuing to extend fellowship, sisterhood, and support to transgender women, who have been such an important part of our WI family.

In April 2026, we will be launching a national network of local WI Sisterhood groups, which will offer monthly opportunities for all people, including transgender women, to come together to socialise, learn from each other, and share their experiences of living as women.

Our activity outside of formal membership has always and will continue to play a vital role in creating welcoming spaces where all women can come together to learn, share ideas, and work together to improve lives in our communities. We remain absolutely committed to delivering on that mission.

Why are you announcing this now?

- Since the Supreme Court's judgment, we have been working closely with legal advisers to understand the impact of the ruling on our organisation and what we must do next.
- Due to the impact we know this will have on our members, we have considered the issue extensively to ensure we have explored all options available to us before making any changes.
- We have now finished that work and have regrettably concluded that we have no other choice but to make these changes to our membership criteria if we are to continue to operate legally as a women's organisation and charity.
- Although we are still awaiting formal guidance from the Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) on how to apply this judgment in practice, we have done our due diligence as an organisation and taken independent legal advice.
- We also owe it to our members to be upfront and honest with them about the issues that might affect them, so we wanted to inform them as soon as we could. We also want to ensure that while our legal change is clear, our intention to maintain our sisterhood with transgender women is equally clear.

What would happen if you didn't make this change?

- While we are still awaiting formal, comprehensive guidance from the EHRC on how to apply the judgment in practice, as a charity, we must abide by the law.
- Not doing so would leave us at risk of costly legal challenge and potential regulatory action from the Commission. We have a public duty to ensure our charity is not in breach of the law.

What happens now to existing transgender women members?

- While we can no longer offer transgender women formal memberships from 1 April 2026 (the start of our new subscription year), we remain committed to continuing our support for transgender women through other activities outside of formal membership.
- We are encouraging members with concerns or questions about the new policy to contact us directly at inclusion@nfwl.org.uk so that we can provide support.
- We will be working with our transgender members and our wider membership between now and April 1 2026, to support them and to clarify the details of our new membership policy.

How will you continue to support and engage with transgender women outside of traditional memberships?

- We remain clear that our strong belief is that transgender women are women. They have been part of the WI family for 40 years, and they will remain part of that family.
- We know that many of our members will find this decision extremely painful, but we have been actively seeking alternative ways - outside of formal membership - of continuing to extend fellowship, sisterhood, and support to transgender women.
- For example, in April 2026, we will be launching a national network of local WI Sisterhood groups, which will offer monthly opportunities for all people, including transgender women, to come together to socialise, learn from each other, and share their experiences of living as women.
- This is just one of several things that we are working on developing into full programmes with the support of existing members, NFWI staff, and trustees. These will be launched from April 2026, and we will provide more details on the full range of programmes in due course.