

action women: the real story of the Women's Institutes

Action Women Exhibition: Evaluation Report

May 2007

This report summarises the findings of questionnaires, telephone interviews and an evaluation workshop conducted in the Reading, York and Newport exhibition venues. The following aspects of the project were evaluated, to assess the extent to which the eight project aims were met and to inform further work of this nature at The Women's Library:

- Visitor experience
- Women's Institute (WI) member participant experience
- Host venue experience

The report lists the eight project aims, summarises the quantitative and qualitative evidence concerning the extent to which this aim was met and comments on the findings.

Section 1 - Evaluation of the participant experience

The training programme for WI members was initiated with two core aims. To measure the extent to which these aims were met, participants in each venue were invited to complete an anonymous questionnaire and to take part in an evaluation workshop.

In Reading 15 WI members took part in the exhibition training programme. Of the participants, 13 completed the anonymous evaluation questionnaire at the end of the programme and eight attended the evaluation workshop.

In York 14 WI members took part in the exhibition training programme. All 14 participants completed the anonymous evaluation questionnaire at the end of the programme and six attended the evaluation workshop.

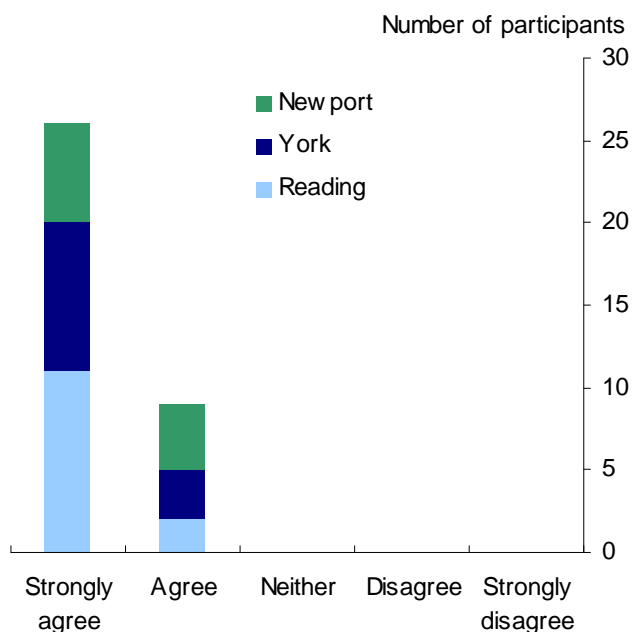
In Newport 16 WI members took part in the exhibition training programme. Of the participants, 10 completed the anonymous evaluation questionnaire at the end of the programme and eight attended the evaluation workshop.

The members of staff who contributed to the development and delivery of the exhibition in each venue were interviewed, by the National Federation of Women's Institute (NFWI) Honorary Archivist.

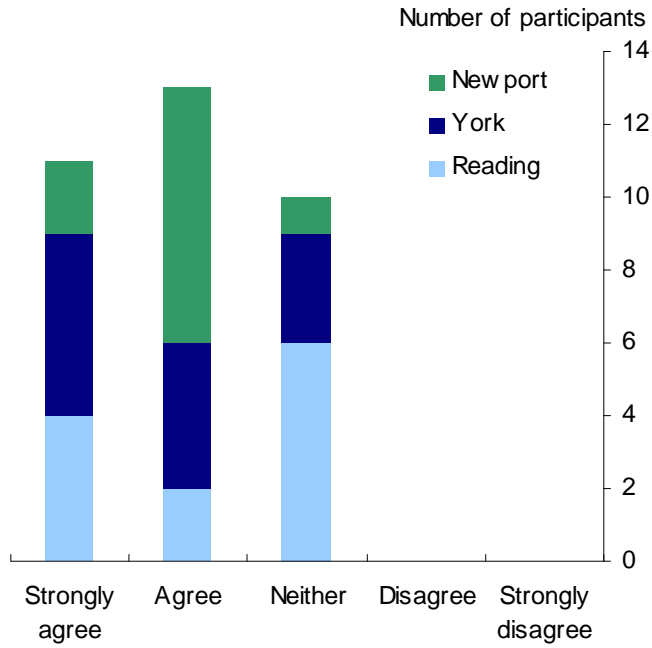
Aim 1:

WI members will develop skills in exhibition curation, conservation, preservation, marketing, collecting, IT and writing

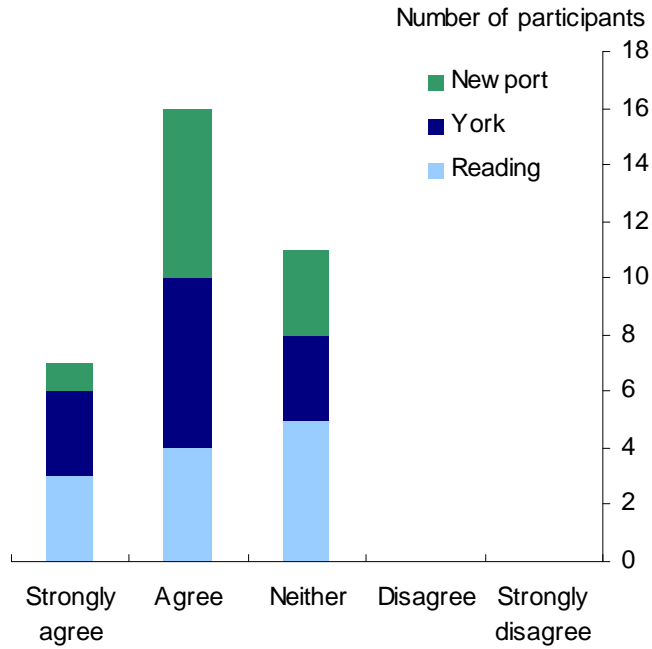
I have enjoyed taking part in this project:



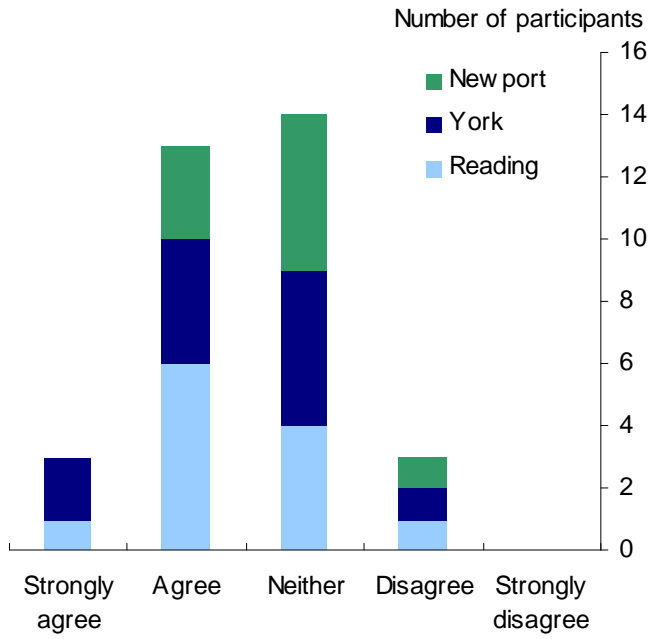
I have developed skills in exhibition curation:



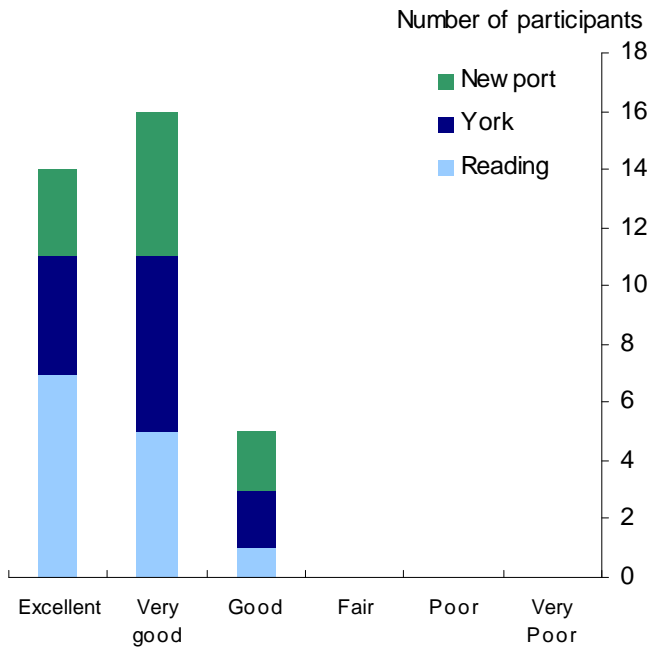
I have developed preservation and conservation skills:



I have developed marketing skills:



How would you rate the training programme overall?



The following comments were made at the end of the questionnaire:

“I felt the guidance and training was excellent. Being involved in the production of the exhibition has been a very enjoyable and rewarding experience. It was a pleasure to work with Charlotte and the friendly and helpful staff at MERL”

“I found the whole process fascinating and it made me appreciate the work behind exhibition which as a member of the public one takes for granted. Charlotte was so patient with us all”

“We were fortunate to have an extremely good project curator, who was very well organised, and took us through the training programme expertly. Initially, I did not realise what a big commitment this would be, but I have not regretted one minute of my time on the project. For me it has been a wonderful experience and I have learnt such a lot. I am only sorry our part is now coming to an end”

“I feel the training and guidance was excellent. Being involved in the production of the exhibition has been a very enjoyable and rewarding experience”

Participants were asked if there were any ways the training programme could have been enhanced. Of the 38 questionnaire respondents 33 left this section blank, suggesting they were satisfied with the programme delivered. The following five comments were on the forms where the section had been completed:

“Sometimes I felt the process moved very slowly, but I came to realise the painstaking process is probably necessary for the sake of absolute accuracy. I did sometimes feel we could have moved along a bit quicker!”

“I felt certain elements of the programme were dominated by some members. Perhaps a better design of programme would have ‘brought out’ those tending to be more reticent”

“Possibly by having another member from Glamorgan Federation”

“The majority of training days were on a Thursday, which wasn’t really convenient for me – may be different days would have included more volunteers”

“I believe the WI could have explained more clearly to its members about the complete project as I think many people were unaware of how the exhibition would be run”

As part of the evaluation workshop, participants were asked to identify ways in which the project could be improved. Five of the 22 responses to this question identified improvements connected to the training programme, although in the

main these comments were expressions of satisfaction, rather than ideas for change:

“The training was very comprehensive and thorough and I can’t think of a single aspect to add to it”

“Difficult to suggest as Charlotte has lead us so well. A ‘Charlotte’ is needed to make it a success”

“I thought the training was excellent. More oral history?”

“Training was excellent. Some session had perhaps too many people, possibly we should have split into smaller groups to decide wording. We needed a better proof reader!”

“No improvements required on training. To make the exhibition less static and more fun – less museum like. To have more modern WI artefacts”

In the evaluation workshop participants were asked to identify the aspects of the project they found inspiring. Six of the 22 respondents identified the skills they had gained through the training programme as the most inspiring aspect of taking part:

“Learning how to put a real professional exhibition together. I never thought I would take part in such an exciting and rewarding experience. Also the enjoyment of talking to visitors”

“The final product, the skills, enthusiasm and forward-looking-ness of the team”

“Meeting with other interested members who have different ideas and skills. Fun of the training meetings”

“Planning meetings working as a team. Being inspired by Charlotte and the fun of it all”

“Learning how to display the exhibition to best advantage”

“The collating session – sorting the wording in particular for the panels”

Comment:

The overall response from WI members who participated has been extremely positive. 100% of participants agreed or strongly agreed that they had enjoyed taking part. When asked which aspects of the project they found most inspirational a wide range of positive outcomes were identified, including team building, acquisition of skills, development of knowledge and understanding and enjoyment of the experience.

All participants agreed that they had developed at least two of the three skills taught through the training programme (curation, conservation and preservation and marketing), many agreeing that they had developed all three skills. Fewest members agreed they had developed marketing skills, suggesting that this element of the training programme should be reconsidered before it is used again. This result can be attributed to the fact that there was only time for one session devoted to this in the programme. It suggests that subsequent sessions should have been included in the programme, so the participants were supported in delivering a marketing plan.

The number of participants neither agreeing nor disagreeing that they had developed skills through the training programme is higher than hoped. This may be because a number of participants already had these skills, so could not agree to having acquired them during the project. In view of this, the wording of evaluation forms in the future will be designed to register improvement of skills as well as acquisition.

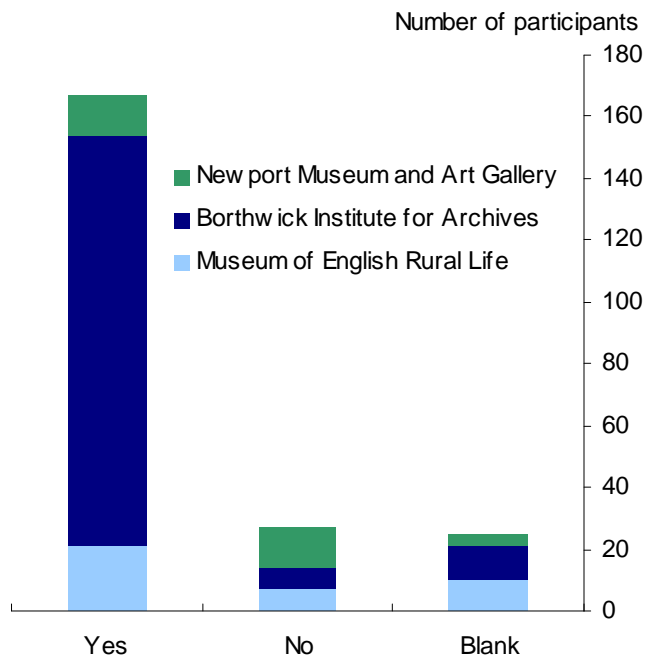
Frequent references were made in the evaluation to the role the Project Co-ordinator played. This demonstrates the importance of such a facilitator when developing a project of this type.

Aim 2:

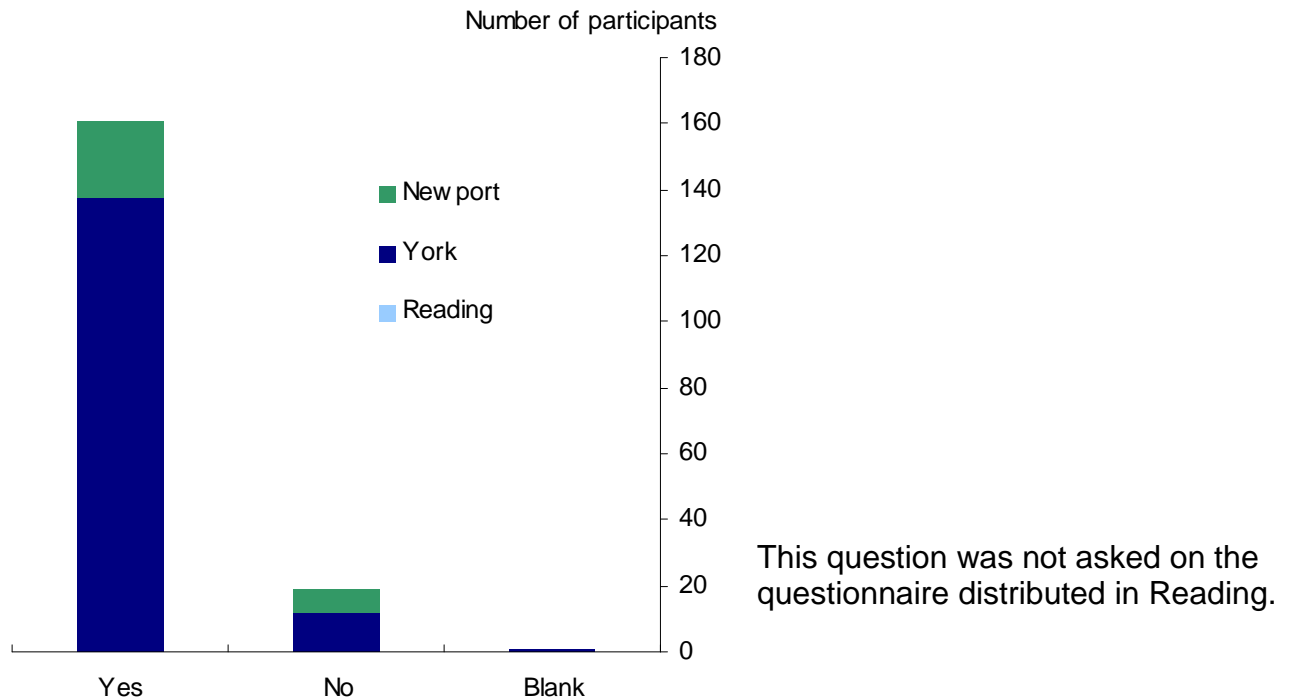
WI members will develop relationship with local libraries, museums and archives

Questionnaire results

Is this your first visit to the host venue?



Are you a WI member?



On the project participant questionnaire six WI members made one or more references to their experience of working with the host venue and their attitude towards the venue:

“The MERL staff have been very helpful and friendly all the time and Berkshire Federation has made some good contacts, which we hope to make use of in the future”

“Being involved in the production of the exhibition has been a very enjoyable and rewarding experience. It was a pleasure to work with Charlotte and the friendly and helpful staff at MERL”

“The exhibition was ‘off the beaten track’ both for locals and visitors to the area”

“Although well advertised by leaflets, local press and radio, the visitor numbers were not up to my expectation. The problem was probably due to location. It is not somewhere that people will just ‘drop in’ while passing”

“I was disappointed that the exhibition was not better publicised to the general public by MERL”

“The situation of the exhibition in York was not easily accessible to local members, and even less to the public”

“Newport was always going to be a contentious venue. Unfortunately Newport does not rate highly as a place with most people. Positively the exhibition has turned out to be excellent – hopefully it will attract many visitors”

When interviewed by the NFWI Honorary Archivist staff involved in the project in Reading commented:

“Hosting the exhibition has been a very positive experience for the museum, it has been good to have the participation of the WI members; it has plugged us into a new audience. MERL had already had some contact with WI members as a result of an earlier project about Land Girls and it is a connection we wish to sustain. We hope that the contact might lead to oral history work and deposits of local archives, especially objects.

MERL has been a good location for the touring exhibition. Many people travelled quite a long way to visit and as the touring exhibition was relatively small it was good to have the other exhibitions to see.

It has been a very positive experience and we are pleased to have been involved. We will consider working with other organisations in the future”

“We had many WI visitors who came in from a wider area than we would normally expect, which was good”

“The experience has been very good and has really raised the profile of MERL. I met some interesting people visiting the exhibition and had enjoyed talking to them, they patronised the shop well and also enjoyed the main museum exhibits. The feedback from visitors was generally positive; there were a few who felt that the exhibition was a bit small. Some people spent a long time looking and others were ‘in and out’. I pointed out the exhibition to all the public who came, but it was the WI groups who discussed it with me and made comments”

“The whole project has been a pleasure to work on, there was a clear partnership agreement and all those involved knew what their role was from the beginning.

The WI members involved were very good to work with, they always had a very professional approach. The feedback given by the WI has helped the service to see ways in which they can be more customer focussed in the future.

The exhibition brought people into the library that would not have come otherwise. In particular visitors to the York Food and Drink Festival, who came to the sugar craft demonstration.

The Library now hopes to work with partners more, and are planning an exhibition with the Adult Community Education Service”

“Overall we have been pleased with the exhibition and the whole thing has been a positive experience. The relationship with both The Women’s Library and the local WI worked well and at all times I knew what was going on. I would be happy to do something similar again”

Comment:

The project has been successful in developing relationships between the host organisations and local WI members. Over 80% of visitors in each venue were visiting for the first time. The questionnaire results suggest, that overall, a high proportion of exhibition visitors were WI members and that the exhibition attracted many visitors who would not have come to the venue otherwise. This view is supported by the feedback from staff at the host venue in Reading, who noted that visitors came from a wider area than they would normally expect and that WI groups engaged with the exhibition to the greatest extent.

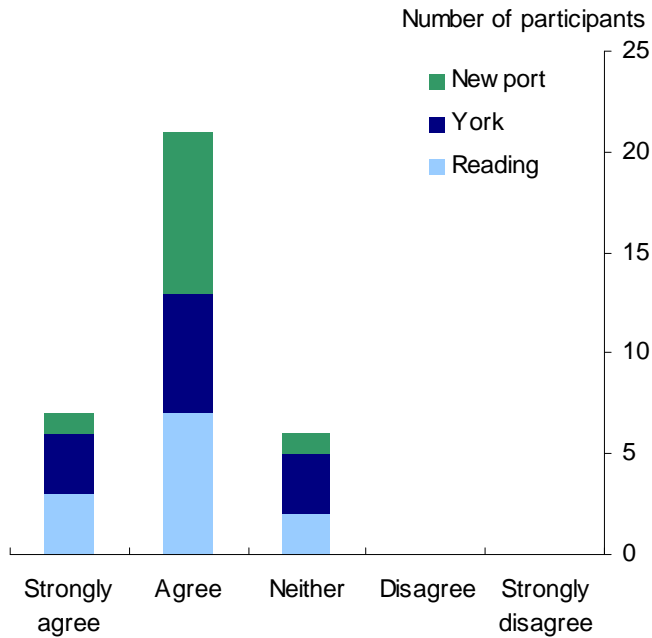
The WI participants and hosts in each venue reflected that they had developed a positive relationship, which may be maintained in the future. The factor likely to affect this, which it will be important for each venue to address in future partnership working, is that some WI members perceived the venues to be geographically difficult to access.

The comments by Reading project participants, concerning marketing of the exhibition, emphasise the need to adapt the marketing element of the training programme, as acknowledged in relation to Aim 1.

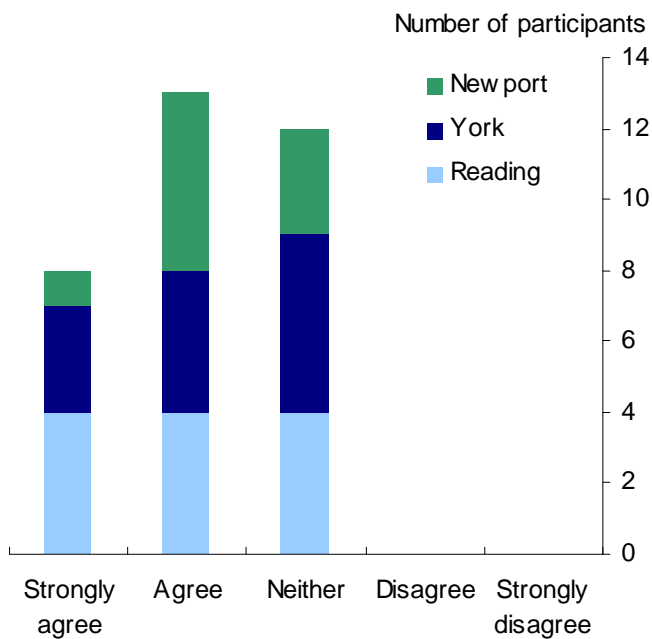
Aim 3:

To create a project that WI members can continue by training the next set of volunteer curators

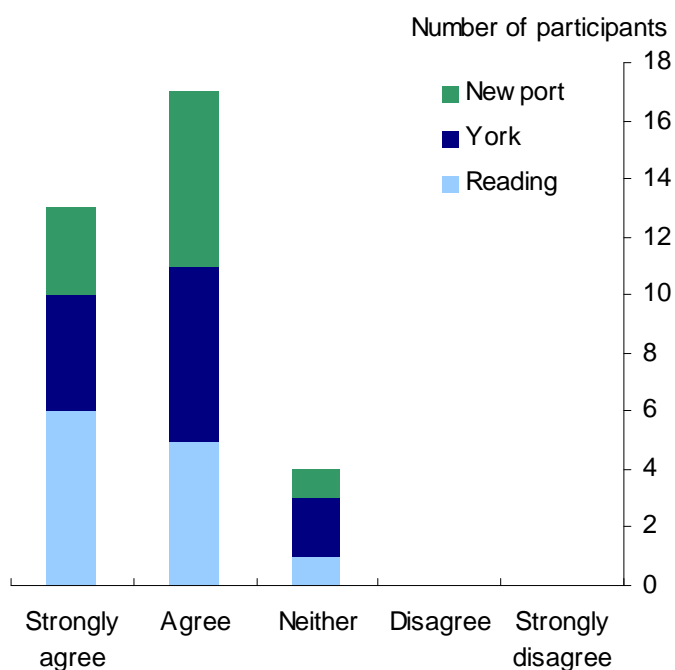
I will be able to use the skills I have developed in my future WI work:



I would like to share the skills I have developed with fellow members:



I will continue to be involved in caring for WI archives in the future:



When asked the extent to which this aim had been achieved the NFWI Honorary Archivist responded:

“The WI has considerable expertise, developed over the years, of putting on exhibitions at agricultural shows and of displaying the WI’s wide range of craft work, but until this project few WI members had any experience of working collaboratively with their local museums and libraries. Nor had they experience of caring for archive materials or understanding the role of the curator.

Through the involvement of teams of WI members at each of the three venues we have already started to share that experience. Those who have been closely involved have also been able to share their experiences through the NFWI Federation Archivist Network. There have been presentations at two of the recent archivist’s workshops at Denman College which have led to WI members beginning to plan their own exhibitions locally”

Comment:

The project has succeeded in encouraging participants to continue caring for WI archives and use the skills they have developed; 88% agreed that they will continue to be involved in caring for WI archives and 63% agreed that they will use the skills they gained in the future. To ensure that the small percentage that did not agree or disagree that they would continue to be involved, it is important that appropriate follow-on projects are organised.

The positive response of the NFWI Honorary Archivist indicates the strong level of support that the NFWI are offering to WI members to achieve this aim.

Section 2 - Evaluation of the visitor experience

Exhibition visitors were invited to make comments and provide feedback on their experience completing a questionnaire, which asked specific questions about all aspects of the exhibition, or a comment form.

In Reading, the questionnaires and comment forms were made available to visitors during the final two weeks of the exhibition. 38 completed questionnaires and 23 comment forms were received.

In York, both the questionnaire and comment form were made available to visitors for the three-month duration of the exhibition. 160 completed questionnaires were received and 91 comment forms.

In Newport, both the questionnaire and comment form were made available to visitors for the two-month duration of the exhibition. 30 complete questionnaires were received and 33 comment forms.

Summary of visitor figures and diversity:

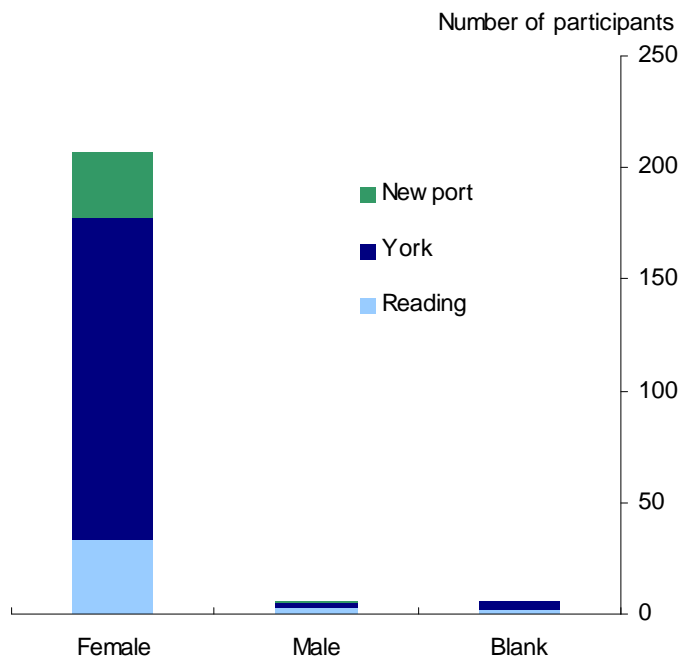
Total visitors Reading: 4,178

Total visitors York: 14,489

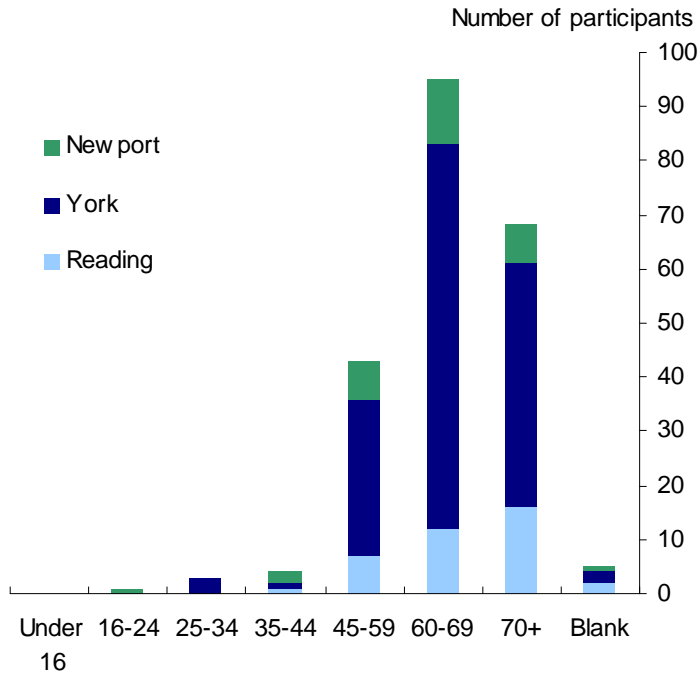
(Borthwick Institute for Archives: 2,441; York Library: 11,248; York Minster: 800)

Total visitors Newport: 6,859

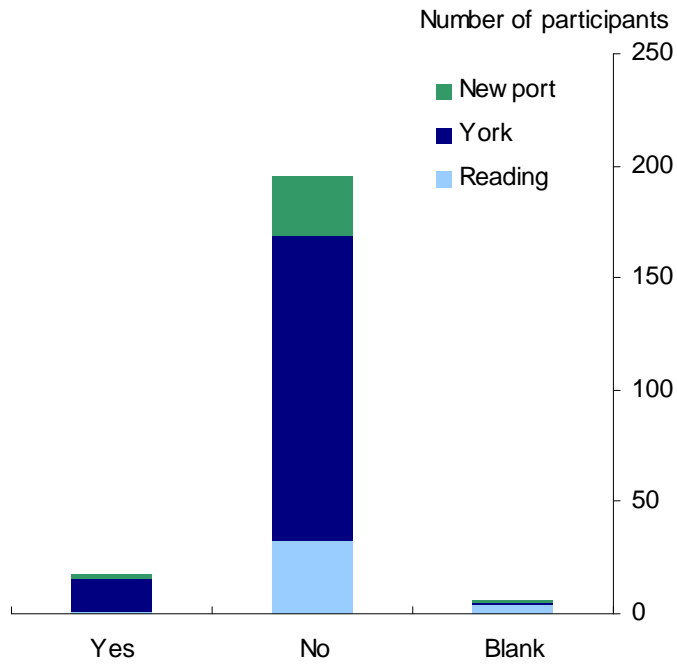
Are you male or female?



To which age group do you belong?



Do you consider yourself to have a disability?



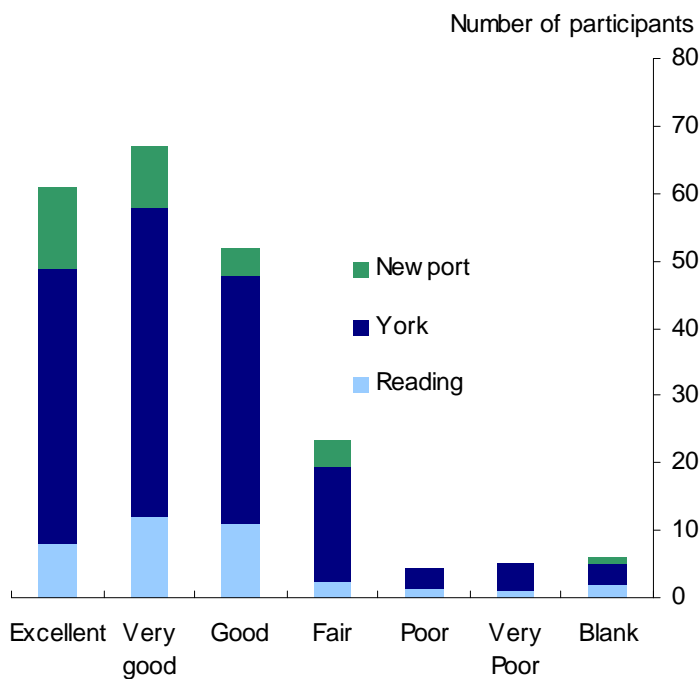
Aims 4 and 5:

Greater public knowledge of WI history, and women’s role in civic history

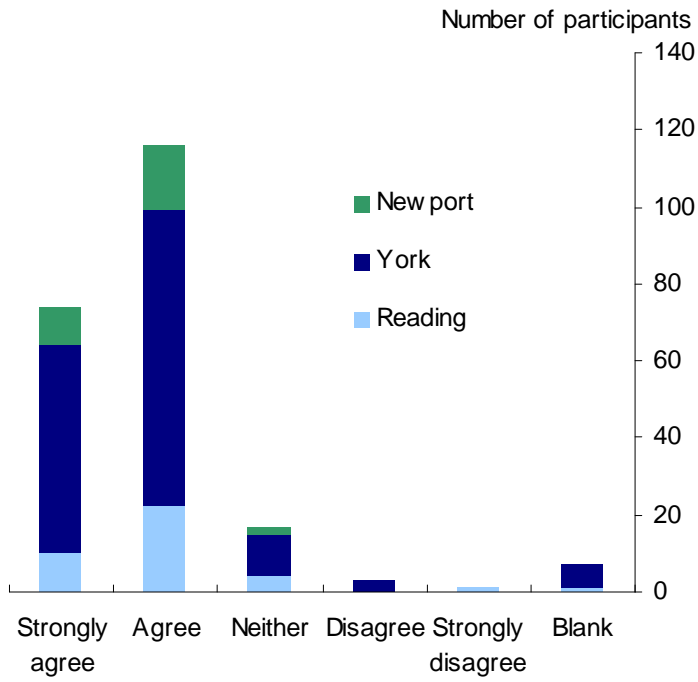
Better public understanding of the WI’s role locally, regionally and nationally

The success with which these two aims have been met has been considered jointly, as many of the visitor comments about the exhibition content are applicable to both aims:

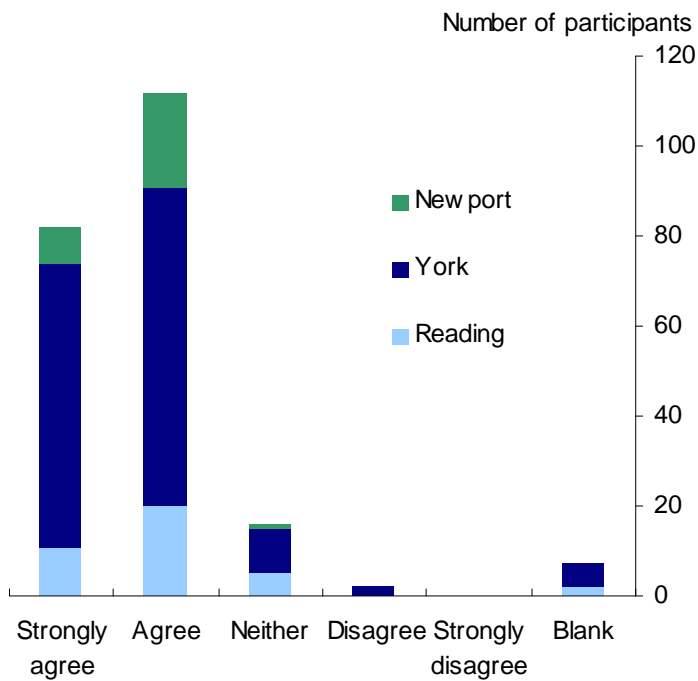
How would you rate the exhibition overall?



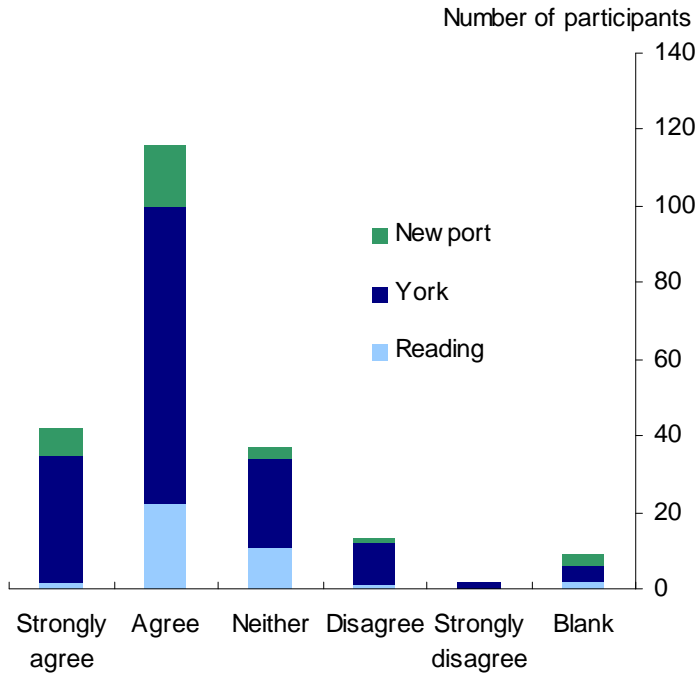
Action Women gave me an insight into the history of the WI movement:



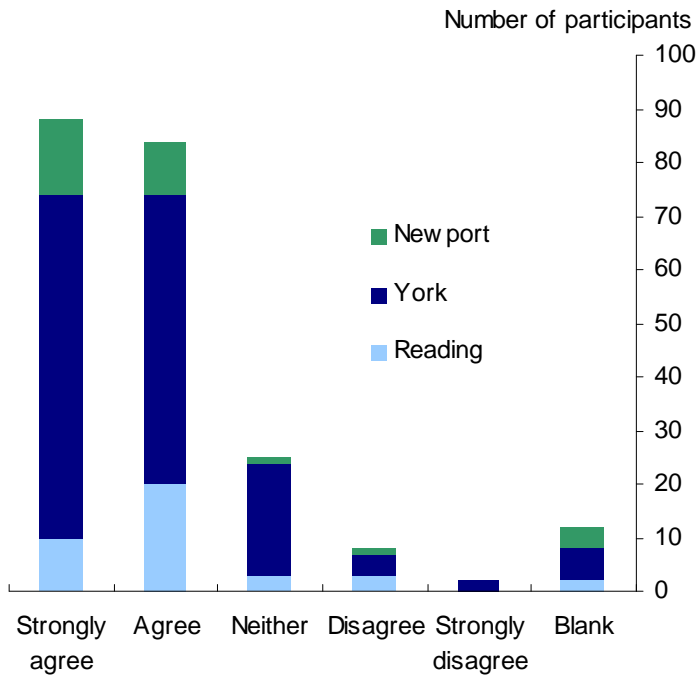
Action Women made me think about how rural women's lives have changed during the last 100 years:



Action Women increased my knowledge of current WI campaigning and activity:



Action Women has given me a greater respect for WI members and the work they undertake:



Of the 239 written comments received on the visitor questionnaires and comment forms, 213 concerned the content of the exhibition. The range of comments fall into the following three categories:

- 81 short comments describing the experience of visiting using one of the following adjectives or similar: “Interesting”, “Informative”, “Inspiring”, and “Professional”.

- 45 comments referred to specific positive learning experiences resulting from a visit. The following quotes are a sample of these comments:

“So many different aspects of WI interest and activity – especially the exhibits of the earlier years”

“I didn’t realise the WI pioneered so much that has affected my life e.g. Keep Britain Tidy and smear tests”

“It has shown me how hard each generation has worked on very diverse subjects to help everyone. We’re a clever lot”

“Fascinating range of exhibits and insight into the lives of so many active women. All credit to the organisers who have done a good job”

- 87 comments suggesting one of the following alterations, to the exhibition content, would enhance the visitor experience:

- A larger exhibition
- A greater number of three-dimensional artefacts
- More artefacts and information from the archive of the NFWI
- More artefacts and information from the archives of neighbouring WI Federations
- Fewer artefacts from the archive of the Federation who took part in the WI members training programme
- More examples of craft produced by WI members
- Audio visual footage concerning the organisation

The following quotes are a sample of these comments:

“A tremendous amount of work has been done, maybe samples from another county would have made it more interesting”

“Very interesting, was smaller than expected”

“A good exhibition, limited only by shortage of space. More room would have possibly increased exhibits”

“At first expected it to be bigger, then realised what a lot of information there was and how long it must have taken to arrange”

Comment:

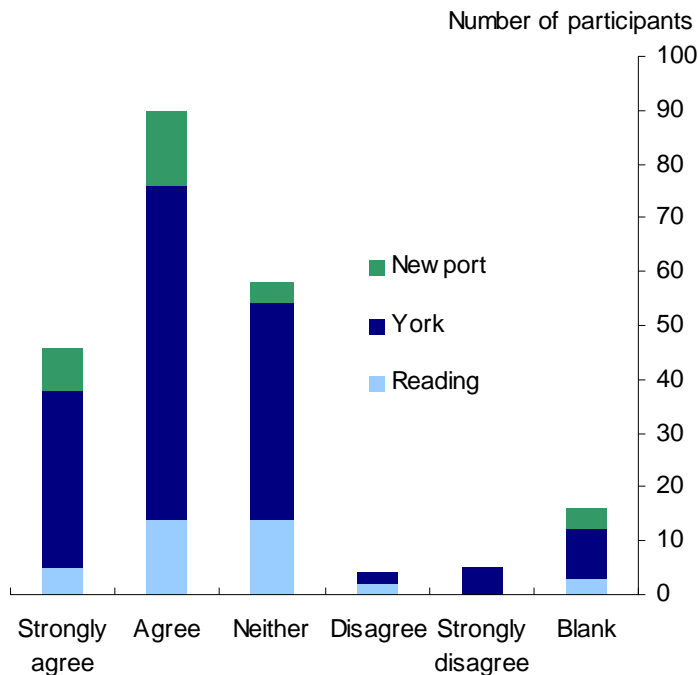
The public response to the exhibition indicated by the questionnaire results is extremely positive; 82% rated the exhibition as good, very good or excellent. The exhibition was successful in developing visitor knowledge and understanding of the WI movement and in changing visitor attitudes to members; 78% agreed or strongly agreed that the exhibition had given them a greater respect for WI members and the work they undertake.

Of the suggested improvements to the exhibition the most frequently mentioned was the enlargement of the exhibition. This suggests that there was a thirst amongst visitors to see more material and that if developing a similar project, with a similar organisation, funds should be sought to produce an exhibition in a larger venue.

Aim 6:

To encouraging active citizenship in the local community, using the WI as a model of an active campaigning organisation

I would now be more likely to support a local or national campaign:



Comment:

The visitor response suggest that the exhibition was largely successful in achieving this aim; 62% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed they would be more likely to take part in a local or national campaign in the future. Only 4% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Section 3 - Evaluation of development aims for The Women's Library

Aim 7:

Increased profile and press coverage of The Women's Library, to encourage new audiences from outside London and to develop the audience for study days, short courses and, potentially in the longer term, research into women's history

The project was reported in the following newspaper, magazine, television and radio articles:

Radio:

31st May 2006, 13.00, interview with the project curator on the Nicki Whiteman show, BBC Radio Berkshire

Television:

13th June 2006, 13.30, Report covering opening of the exhibition in Reading, ITV Local News, Reading

Print:

Martin, N. 2006. Not just jam – WI shows radical side. The Daily Telegraph. March 20, 2006, p10

Third Sector. 2006. Communications – Three minutes with ... Charlotte Dew, project co-ordinator, Women's Library. Third Sector. March 22, 2006.

Stamper, A. 2006. Taking the WI on tour. WI Home and Country. April 2006, p9

Knee-Robinson, A. 2006. Action Women. Berkshire Life. May 2006, pp70-71

Newbury News. 2006. Behold *The real story of the Women's Institute*. Newbury News. May 25, 2006, p6

O'Hara, M. 2006. Action Women at the heart of WI history. Society Guardian. May 24, 2006, p2

Dew, C. 2006. Touring Exhibition: 'Action Women: the real story of the Women's Institutes. ARC (Archives, Records Management and Conservation). May 2006, pp20-21

University of Reading. 2006. Action Women! Bulletin. 15 June 2006, 415, p3

Powell, A. 2006. Exhibition proves there is more to the WI than making jam and cakes. The Reading Chronicle. June 15, 2006, p19

Dew, C. 2006. WI Action Women hit the road. The Women's Library Newsletter. Spring-Summer 2006, p1

Dew, C. 2006. Touring exhibition: 'Action Women: the real story of the Women's Institutes'. Women's History Magazine. Issue 53, Summer 2006, p49

Dew, C. 2006. Action Women: the real story of the 'WI'. The Museum of English Rural Life newsletter. Summer newsletter, August 2006, p1

Stamper, A. 2006. WI exhibition open. WI Home and Country. August 2006, p6

The Press. 2006. Road show tells story of the WI. The Press. September 21, 2006, p27

The University of York. 2006. The real WI. The University of York magazine. October 2006, p7

Dew, C. 2006. Training Women for Action. GEM (Group for Education in Museums) News. Autumn 2006, pp18-19

Dew, C. 2006. Action Women move to York. The Women's Library Newsletter. Autumn-Winter 2006, p1

Exhibition visitors were given the opportunity to join The Women's Library mailing list when completing a visitor questionnaire or comment form. Of the 375 exhibition visitors who completed a comment form or questionnaire, 76 asked to be added to the mailing list. As members of the mailing list these visitors will receive regular information about the Library programmes. It will be possible, through the Library event booking system, to monitor how many visitors book to attend events at the Library.

Comment:

The press response to the exhibition has been extremely positive on a national and local level. The Library has been able to work successfully in partnership with the host venues and the NFWI to ensure it received wide coverage in popular and specialist press.

The response within the museum community has also been very positive; two articles have been published in specialist museum journals. The Library will continue to raise its profile within the sector by looking to present papers, about the project, at relevant conferences. A workshop was to exploring the exhibition model Yorkshire Museums Conference in April 2007, attracting 56 attendees. In March 2007 the exhibition was one of five short listed for a Museums and Heritage Award in the temporary and touring exhibition category.

The Library will encourage WI members and Institutes to continue their relationship and interest in the Library through regular mailings and the provision of a WI handling collection. Library guides will be trained to use the handling collection with visiting WI groups.

Aim 8:

Create a model for local communities to gain skills collecting, caring for and displaying their heritage

Taking into consideration the findings of the project evaluation, the Library has developed a toolkit for WI members, to help them care for and exhibit their archive collections. It is available on The Women's Library and NFWI websites. The toolkit is comprised of the following modules and appendices, to guide users through the steps necessary to create an exhibition in partnership with another cultural organisation:

1. Preface

2. Introduction

- 2.1 Project description**
- 2.2 Project background**
- 2.3 Why take part in the project?**
- 2.4 How to use the toolkit**

3. The *Action Women* exhibition kit

- 3.1 Contents of the kit**
- 3.2 Exhibition style and format**

4. Exhibition Toolkit – A guide to displaying *Action Women*

- 4.1 Goal 1:** Forming an exhibition team
- 4.2 Goal 2:** Identifying and working with a partner
- 4.3 Goal 3:** Writing a project schedule
- 4.4 Goal 4:** Budgeting and funding
- 4.5 Goal 5:** Planning the exhibition
- 4.6 Goal 6:** Identifying archival resources for display
- 4.7 Goal 7:** Planning an activities programme
- 4.8 Goal 8:** Exhibition marketing
- 4.9 Goal 9:** Object preparation and mounting
- 4.10 Goal 10:** Exhibition installation
- 4.11 Goal 11:** Exhibition opening
- 4.12 Goal 12:** Evaluation
- 4.13 Goal 13:** Exhibition de-installation

5. Action point checklist

6. Appendices

- Appendix 1:** Images of core exhibition panels
- Appendix 2:** Sample partnership contract
- Appendix 3:** Images of regional exhibition panels
- Appendix 4:** Guide to writing exhibition text
- Appendix 5:** Guide to writing object labels
- Appendix 6:** Images of archival material and objects displayed in previous *Action Women* exhibitions
- Appendix 7:** Example events and activities programme
- Appendix 8:** Sample press release
- Appendix 9:** Example *Action Women* poster
- Appendix 10:** *Action Women* poster template
- Appendix 11:** Example *Action Women* leaflet
- Appendix 12:** Example visitor questionnaire
- Appendix 13:** Example visitor comments form
- Appendix 14:** *Action Women* evaluation report

The exhibition model will also be used to develop future similar projects at The Women Library.

Charlotte Dew
NFWI Project Co-ordinator
May 2007