



The Scottish Parliament  
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

# Report of the 12<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians British Isles and Mediterranean Regional Conference

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**Sunday 8 to Tuesday 10 February 2026, Belfast, Northern Ireland**



Photo: Northern Ireland Assembly

## Introduction

1. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) is divided into nine geographic regions: Africa, Asia, Australia, British Islands and Mediterranean (BIM), Canada, the Caribbean, the Americas and Atlantic (CAA), India, the Pacific and South East Asia. The BIM region is made up of branches from Alderney, Cyprus, Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Guernsey, Isle of Man, Jersey, Malta, Northern Ireland, Sark, St Helena, Scotland, Wales and the United Kingdom.
2. The 12<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) British Isles and Mediterranean Regional (BIMR) Conference took place in Belfast, Northern Ireland, 8 to 10 February 2026. This is the first time the Assembly have hosted the conference. The theme of the conference was 'Power & Peace: Protecting Our Mental Health in Public Life', which covered discussions on holding power without losing yourself; mental health and emotional labour; the role of institutions in supporting work-life boundaries and coping mechanisms; sustaining women's leadership under pressure; and creating a Wellbeing Pledge for Women in Public Life.
3. In addition to the above sessions, the conference included the BIMR CWP Steering Committee meeting.
4. The cross-party delegation from the Scottish Parliament consisted of two Members:
  - Sarah Boyack MSP, member of the Scotland Branch Executive Committee and Vice Chair of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Network (CWP) BIMR Steering Committee.
  - Roz McCall MSP, member of the Scotland Branch Executive Committee and member of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Network (CWP) BIMR Steering Committee.

## Purpose

5. The conference provided delegates with the opportunity to strengthen their regional CWP network, and benefit from peer-to-peer exchanges on issues affecting the mental health and wellbeing of parliamentarians in the BIMR. It brought together 28 delegates from Guernsey, Isle of Man, Malta, Northern Ireland, Scotland, United Kingdom and Wales. For the first time since their admittance to CPA, delegates from Sark were present at the conference. Furthermore, Catherine Fife MPP, from the Provincial Parliament of Ontario, Canada, attended as an international guest; CPA HQ also attended the conference. Alderney, Cyprus, Gibraltar, Falkland Islands, Jersey, and St Helena were unable to attend.
6. A copy of the programme is attached at Annex A.



Photo: Northern Ireland Assembly

## Recommendations

7. Roz McCall MSP will mention to her Party the practical take-aways from Kerry McWilliam's Masterclass session, especially for the attention of new Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs). She has also asked the International Relations Office (IRO) to pass on the usefulness of the session within both the Scottish Parliament and as part of the Election Induction Programme.
8. The IRO has shared information from the Keynote Speech and the Masterclass regarding the mental health and wellbeing of Members with colleagues involved in the Election Induction Programme in the Scottish Parliament.
9. The IRO has shared materials and PowerPoint slides from the Keynote Speech and the Masterclass with colleagues in the Colleague Experience Team for potential future staff and MSP training.
10. Roz McCall MSP has shared information from the Keynote Speech with her Party.
11. Roz McCall MSP will write to the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament, as Chair of the Women's Caucus, to suggest she invites Leanne Spencer to be a guest speaker at a future Women's Caucus event.
12. "It would be good to do a workshop session run by Leanne to share the insights we covered at the Conference". Sarah Boyack MSP

13. "My action points are to volunteer to be a mentor, and to share the Fabian Society contact details that I have regarding information on how they run their programme." Sarah Boyack MSP
14. Roz McCall MSP will put herself forward to be a mentor and will encourage Party colleagues to sign up as well.
15. Sarah Boyack MSP has suggested that the Scottish Parliament circulates information about the BIMR CWP mentoring scheme to MSPs after the Scottish Parliament election.
16. "The Scottish Branch should get copies of the Women's mentoring leaflets and circulate to MSPs after the election." Sarah Boyack
17. The IRO will take this forward when the leaflets become available.

## **Programme**

### **Sunday 8 February 2026**

#### **BIMR CWP Steering Committee meeting**

18. The first session of the conference was the BIMR CWP Steering Committee meeting, attended by Sarah Boyack MSP and Roz McCall MSP. The session was chaired by BIMR CWP Steering Committee Chair, Deputy Sasha Kazantseva-Miller (Guernsey).
19. Invited guest, CWP Chair Catherine Fife MPP (Ontario), updated members on the work of the global CWP Steering Committee.
20. Members discussed upcoming activities and Branches provided updates on their recent work.
21. "It was great getting the insights from our CWP Chair Catherine Fife and being able to share our experiences across our range of branches with her. We had good updates on:
  - Regional Strengthening Funds – how we maximise their impact and the fact that there's now competition for them, which is a good thing.
  - CWP conference at the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference– it would be good to get ideas from our branches and to find ways to include men in our discussions about supporting female members.
  - Childcare questionnaire – the Steering Committee has discussed and will now circulate to Branches.
  - Given the elections which are taking place this this year across the BIMR it would be good to circulate CPA welcome letters to all of our elected female members, but especially new members and to circulate the CWP leaflet at branch stalls." Sarah Boyack MSP
22. "It was really important to have Catherine Fife there. The BIM region approached her and the other candidates prior to the CWP Chair election

to find out more information, and in doing so that meant she was very interested in what we as a region were wanting to do.

23. For me the most important issue we were looking at in the Steering Committee meeting was the mentoring scheme. I believe this is a fundamental move forward for the region and for women. Personally, I want to put myself forward as a mentor.” Roz McCall MSP



Photo: Amy Hall

## **Launch of CWP Mentoring Programme**

24. Following the Steering Committee meeting, the rest of the delegates joined the group and BIMR CWP Steering Committee Chair, Deputy Sasha Kazantseva-Miller (Guernsey), officially launched the CWP Mentoring Programme.
25. “It was a good session and it is important it is given the opportunity to succeed. We need to take the initial steps and learn as we progress.” Roz McCall MSP
26. “My action points are to volunteer to be a mentor, to share the Fabian Society contact details that I have regarding information on how they run their programme. Finally, the Scottish Branch should get copies of the Women’s mentoring leaflets and circulate to MSPs after the election.” Sarah Boyack MSP

## Monday 9 February 2026

### Welcome Address by the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly, Edwin Poots MLA

27. Delegates were officially welcomed to the conference by the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly, Edwin Poots MLA.
28. “The conference opening sessions were very positive with great welcome speeches.” Sarah Boyack MSP



Photo: Northern Ireland Assembly

### Keynote Speech: “Holding Power Without Losing Yourself” followed by guided peer networking activity

29. The keynote speech of the conference was delivered by Leanne Spencer, motivational speaker and author, on the topic “Holding Power Without Losing Yourself”. The speech centred around improving wellbeing and developing a mindset that acknowledges that two opposing ideas are mutually inclusive, such as rest and productivity.
30. The session included a group exercise with self-reflective questions around values, identity, community and resources.
31. “In her Keynote Speech Leanne Spencer talked about Power and Peace being a paradox. That we have to start thinking about self-care and workloads, individual needs versus our team needs, how we address the fact that the pace of work is accelerating, partly through being online

more, the fact that AI has risks as well as opportunities, how we manage hybrid working and managing multi-generational teams.

32. Our round tables at the conference were excellent at enabling us to share different experiences and best practice. We discussed how we build resilience, values and community. We need to focus on what we can control and reflect on maximising our effectiveness, not just constantly working. It was agreed that women work harder and interrogate issues more, so how do we work together in a more collegiate manner?
33. The conclusions I took from the session were: don't say yes to everything, be prepared to say no, because you cannot do everything. Finally, I think it's worth reflecting on the ultimate paradox – we know what to do, but don't." Sarah Boyack MSP
34. "I thought Leanne was excellent, and the session was exceptionally valuable and relatable.
35. What I took away from Leanne was how each independent person can look at their wellbeing. It is the sort of programme we need to be adopting here, we need to be able to have that open for our parliamentarians". Roz McCall MSP

## **Panel Discussion: Mental Health & Emotional Labour and Group session: Role of institutions in supporting work-life boundaries & coping mechanisms**

36. This session was a panel discussion chaired by Sarah Travers, a journalist and presenter based in Northern Ireland. The panel was made up of: Judith Gillespie CBE, the first woman to be appointed as Assistant Chief Constable in the history of the Police Service of Northern Ireland; Joanne Bunting MLA (Northern Ireland), Junior Minister in The Executive Office and MLA for East Belfast; and Leanne Spencer, keynote speaker and author.
37. The panellists spoke about the challenges of being a woman in public life and the importance of looking after one's own wellbeing.
38. The speakers covered themes such as dealing with online abuse, creating male allies, how senior figures showing vulnerability can help other members to speak out about how they are feeling, and, encouraging women not to feel guilty if they need time off from work.
39. "As talked about in the session, the issue for women in public life is social media, which allowed me to mention our Social Media Monitoring system, which I do believe is at the forefront of social media support in any parliament.
40. The question for me is, is work life balance something we can fully achieve through parliamentary structure? We have a creche facility and still we have a work life balance issue,so it raised questions on how much

of this is on the individual parliamentarian, vs how much of it is on the parties, vs how much of it is on the parliament.” Roz McCall MSP

41. “There are issues for our Scottish Parliament- how do we support both new and returning MSPs to manage the multiple challenges they face and be as effective as possible. There will be different challenges for women members especially regarding childcare”. Sarah Boyack MSP



Photo: Northern Ireland Assembly

## Feedback, wrap up, and pledge input

42. A wrap-up session covering the key topics discussed during Day 1 of the Conference, led by Stephanie Mallon, Clerk Assistant at the Northern Ireland Assembly and Secretary to the Northern Ireland Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.
43. Members were asked to think of the content to be included in a Wellbeing Pledge for Women in Public Life, which would be revisited during Day 2 of the Conference.

## Tuesday 10 February 2026

### Masterclass: “Sustaining Women’s Leadership Under Pressure” followed by guided group activity

44. The first session of Day 2 was a Masterclass delivered by Kerry McWilliams, Complex Trauma Practitioner, under the theme of “Sustaining Women’s Leadership Under Pressure”.
45. This was a practical session demonstrating nervous system regulation techniques to help prevent women in politics burning out. Kerry covered four techniques: breathwork, emotional freedom technique/ tapping, havening and vergence.

46. She covered the concept that one's resilience and tenacity depend on effective management of stress and that we need to have emotional and somatic awareness to catch stress and burnout early.
47. "In an excellent presentation Kerry McWilliams gave 5 key issues for us to reflect on:
- To look critically at the leadership behaviours which research shows are often more expected of women.
  - To question why women in public life burnout.
  - To explore what might scaffold and support women holding positions of influence in public life.
  - To understand the science and experience of some evidence based nervous system regulation.
  - To reflect on what we've learned, in particular to acknowledge the fact that women face different pressures from male colleagues." Sarah Boyack MSP
48. "This session, similar to the previous day's session, was very much focused on how an individual focuses on what is right for them.
49. So again, I would highlight that I think it is a very valuable session but it's about how we bring that session to the Scottish Parliament rather than any take-homes that I individually have. So it's a similar action point to the first day to the extent that we should be looking at how we promote that within the Scottish Parliament for individuals to have access to, such as in our induction process, and for me to mention this to the Conservative Party so that they can have access to that with the new cohort of MSPs." Roz McCall MSP

## **Themes and ideas and Co-Creation Session: Refinement of Wellbeing Pledge for Women in Public Life**

50. Stephanie Mallon, Clerk Assistant (Northern Ireland), led an interactive group session where delegates considered a draft Wellbeing Pledge for Women in Public Life that had been drawn up as a result of the discussions had over the Conference.
51. In groups, delegates had the chance to edit the content of the pledge and provide feedback on it; a final version will be sent to delegates after the Conference.
52. "I don't have direct feedback on the pledge, but I think my priorities for implementing the lessons from the conference would be doing workshops on wellbeing and briefing new members on our safety work regarding social media, as part of our induction process, and organising an early Women's Caucus." Sarah Boyack MSP

53. "I greatly appreciate what was trying to be achieved here, I think it is right that we should, as parliamentarians, be trying to focus our attention on how we move forward the wellbeing of the parliamentarians who are coming in to do the job. The issue I have with the pledge is whilst it is noble to come up with one, it will be very difficult to enact, and I personally believe strongly that if you are going to pledge to do something then you do it. For me, we are in the early stages of this pledge, and this might take some time to fully come together, so watch this space." Roz McCall MSP



Photo: Northern Ireland Assembly

## Conference closing remarks

54. Before the Conference was closed, Deputy Sasha Kazantseva-Miller (Guernsey), as BIMR CWP Chair, led a group discussion on matters raised at the CWP Steering Committee meeting, namely themes that the region may be interested to submit for the 2026 Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in South Africa, and barriers to women's participation at conferences.
55. Deputy Sasha Kazantseva-Miller offered a special thanks to Sarah Boyack MSP for her work as Vice-Chair on the CWP Steering Committee as she is standing down at the next Scottish Parliament election.
56. The conference was closed by Michelle McIlveen MLA (Northern Ireland).



Photo: Northern Ireland Assembly

## Feedback

57. "I found the conference excellent for networking and thought the focus on wellbeing was excellent. I don't think I've spent work time actually thinking about how we support colleagues to deliver wellbeing both as individuals or reflecting on how we deal with the pressures we face. I found the event less political than usual in terms of feedback. I think I'd promote through the Women's Caucus and induction sessions. Not just endless paperwork for new MSPs to have to read." Sarah Boyack MSP
58. "It was an excellently run conference, coming at what we need to look at as parliamentarians from an entirely different angle, and I welcomed that view. I think it is important that we do focus on the wellbeing of the individual especially when so much of the external care provision is by women so making sure that we are well protected in that environment will always help them to do their job better. It was excellent conference overall featuring an excellent group of sessions, and I greatly appreciate the work Belfast put in.
59. The importance of being there in person to underscore the relationships that we have makes a fundamental difference in us being able to do our job. Any online session that would have been done for this conference would not have had the fundamental impact that being in that room had. Every session was lived by the person there and therefore taken on board; to try and do that remotely would one hundred per cent have not worked. The benefit of the sessions and being there in those sessions was paramount. The relationships that we continue to forge with the other

parliaments and the other parliamentarians is essential and it is creating bonds that is allowing us to make strides forwards in supporting women in the parliaments.” Roz McCall MSP

## Conclusion

60. The 12<sup>th</sup> Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians British Isles and Mediterranean Regional Conference took place in Belfast, Northern Ireland, 8 to 10 February 2026 and the Scottish Parliament was represented by Sarah Boyack MSP and Roz McCall MSP.
61. The Conference provided delegates with the opportunity to strengthen their regional CWP network, and benefit from peer-to-peer exchanges on issues affecting the mental health and wellbeing of parliamentarians in the BIMR. Sessions covered topics relating to wellbeing and resilience; mental health and emotional labour; the role of institutions in supporting work-life boundaries; the impact of social media; coping mechanisms to prevent burnout; and creating a Wellbeing Pledge for Women in Public Life.
62. The conference brought together 28 delegates from Guernsey, Isle of Man, Malta, Northern Ireland, Sark, Scotland, United Kingdom and Wales. An external guest from the Provincial Parliament of Ontario, Canada, and CPA HQ also attended the conference.
63. The CPA Scotland Branch would like to thank our hosts the Northern Ireland CPA Branch for their very warm welcome and kind hospitality.

**International Relations Office**

March 2026

# Annexes

## Annex A

### **Sunday 8 February 2026**

- 08:20 Depart Edinburgh (EDI)
- 09:15 Arrive in Belfast City (BHD)
- 13:30 Bus tour of Belfast
- 16:00 BIMR CWP Steering Committee meeting
- 17:30 Launch of CWP Mentoring Programme
- 18:30 Welcome reception
- 19:00 Informal Dinner

### **Monday 9 February 2026**

- 09:15 Welcome address by the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly  
Edwin Poots MLA
- 09:30 Group photographs
- 09:50 Opening address
- 09:55 Conference overview
- 10:00 Keynote Speech: “Holding Power Without Losing Yourself” followed by  
guided peer networking activity
- 13:35 Tour of Parliament Buildings (optional)
- 14:30 Panel Discussion: Mental Health & Emotional Labour
- 15:30 Group session: Role of institutions in supporting work-life boundaries &  
coping mechanisms
- 16:30 Feedback, wrap up, and pledge input
- 19:00 Drinks reception and dinner

### **Tuesday 10 February 2026**

- 09:15 Masterclass: “Sustaining Women’s Leadership Under Pressure”  
followed by guided group activity
- 11:15 Themes and ideas for the Wellbeing Pledge for Women in Public Life
- 12:00 Co-Creation Session: Refinement of Wellbeing Pledge for Women in  
Public Life
- 12:45 Conference closing remarks
- 18:50 Depart Belfast City (BHD)
- 19:45 Arrive in Edinburgh (EDI)