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Introduction

The theme of this year's CPA British Islands and Mediterranean Region Conference was "Addressing the Needs of a Modern Parliament", which looked at the democratic measures in place to safeguard diverse representation in parliaments, as well as the support and education available to parliamentarians themselves. Delegates discussed the importance of inclusion and the impact of lived experience on policy-making and democratic processes. Topics ranged from wellbeing in parliament to the evolving landscape of political engagement. Members of the Welsh Youth Parliament shared their experiences with delegates.

Conference activities included the AGM and the launch of the regional LGBT+ Network, opened by the Llywydd, Elin Jones MS, and Regional Secretary Sarah Dickson. In a session on LGBT+ voices in Parliament, delegates discussed the volatility of progress in certain jurisdictions, as well as acknowledging the regional differences and the BIM Region's role in leading by example in this area. Representation of persons with disabilities was also discussed with a session that addressed the importance of embedding individuals in all working processes of parliament.

The conference also provided delegates with the opportunity to actively network and welcome Members of the Chief Pleas of Sark, marking the 14th jurisdiction to join the region.

The Conference took place over three days and included a series of plenary sessions and workshops. It was opened by the Llywldd, Elin Jones MS, and concluded with an address by CPA Senedd Chair, Rhun ap Iorwerth MS.



Title page and above photo credit: CPA Wales

Background

CPA British Islands and Mediterranean Region (BIMR)

The branches that make up CPA British Islands and Mediterranean Region (BIMR) are Alderney, Cyprus, Falkland Islands, Gibraltar, Guernsey, Isle of Man, Jersey, Malta, Northern Ireland, St Helena, Scotland, UK and Wales. Sark's application to join CPA will be tabled at the 2025 General Assembly.

CPA UK serves as its Secretariat. Three Regional Representatives from the region sit on the international CPA Executive Committee: Stuart McMillan MSP (Scotland), Deputy Mary Le Hegarat (Jersey) and Rt Hon. David Mundell MP (UK).

CPA BIMR Strategy

The aims of region are to work together in pursuing the Association's purpose; promote close relations among its branches and members; and to foster close relations with the other regions of the Association.

Each AGM agrees a theme to collaborate on through the following year. Thematic work is led by a Working Group supported by the Secretariat. At the 2025 AGM delegates agreed to continue joint work on '**Digital Transformation in Parliaments**'.



Delegates

CPA Cyprus



Hon. Christos Orphanides MP

Christiana Solomonidou – Delegation Secretary

CPA Gibraltar



Hon. Leslie Bruzon MP

Christian Santos GMD MP

Craig Sacarello MP

Edwin J Reyes MP

Phillip Borge McCarthy - Delegation Secretary

CPA Guernsey



*No Deputies were able to attend due to elections

Simon Ross, Delegation Secretary

CPA Isle of Man



Speaker Juan Watterson, SHK

Kirstie Morphet MLC

Paul Craine MLC

Tim Crookall MHK

Carlos August-Phillips - Delegation Secretary

CPA Jersey



Deputy Montfort Tadier

Deputy Louise Doublet

Connétable Mike Jackson

Eva Patterson - Delegation Secretary

CPA Malta



Hon. Carmelo Abela MP

Hon. Graziella Attard Previ MP

Hon. Ian Vassallo MP

Emma Terribile - Delegation Secretary

Delegates

CPA Northern Ireland



Steve Aiken, MLA OBE
Jonathan Buckley MLA
Paul Frew, MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Nicola Crawford - Delegation Secretary

CPA Sark



Speaker Paul Armorgie
Conseiller Natalie Tighe
William Spooner - Delegation Secretary

CPA Scotland



Jeremy Balfour MSP
Sarah Boyack MSP
Stuart McMillan MSP
Jamie Greene MSP
Charlotta Craig – Delegation Secretary

CPA St Helena



*No Councillors were able to attend due to elections

CPA UK



Baroness Gloria Hooper
Rt Hon David Mundell MP
Kate Osamor MP
Sarah Dickson, BIM Regional Secretary
Helen Haywood, Delegation Secretary
Matthew Hamilton, CPA UK

Delegates

CPA Wales



Llywydd, Elin Jones MS
Rhun ap Iorwerth MS
Delyth Jewell MS
Natasha Asghar MS
Sam Rowlands MS
Alun Davies MS
DPO, David Rees MS
Al Davies, Delegation Secretary
Elin Sutton, CPA Wales

CPA HQ Secretariat



Stephen Twigg, CPA Secretary-General
Sharon Moses, Head of Human Resources

International Observers



Delegates from the Western Cape Provincial Parliament and the National Assembly of Quebec attended the Conference as observers.



Day 1

Opening Address

The Conference was officially opened by Llywydd, Elin Jones MS, and opening remarks were given by Dr Manon Antoniazzi, Chief Executive & Clerk of the Senedd and CPA Secretary General, Stephen Twigg.



Photo credit: CPA Wales

BIMR Annual General Meeting

At the BIMR Annual General Meeting delegates heard from the regional representatives on CPA governance and programme updates. The BIMR CWP Chair election took place and Deputy Sasha Kasantseva-Miller (Guernsey) was elected as the new Chair. The Meeting was chaired by CPA Regional Representative, Stuart McMillan (Scotland), and updates were given by Regional Secretary Sarah Dickson, Acting Chair of the BIMR Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Steering Committee Sarah Boyack MSP (Scotland), the BIMR Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities Regional Champion Jeremy Balfour MSP (Scotland) and Small Branches Regional Representative Adrian Gabriel (Guernsey).

Delegates agreed to continue the 24/25 strategic theme Digital Transformation for 2025/26 as there was still work to be done on this. Full minutes of the meeting are available from the CPA BIMR Secretariat.

Day 1

Plenary 1: “The Welsh Youth Parliament Experience - Lessons learned”

This session examined the structure of the Welsh Youth Parliament (WYP) and championed its role in giving young people a voice within democratic processes in Wales. It highlighted the importance of youth engagement and the impact of youth perspectives on policy-making. The Llywydd Elin Jones MS opened the plenary and noted the tangible role the WYP had played in decision-making in Wales, independent of party politics.

Delyth Lewis (Youth Parliament Project Manager) explained that forty seats were elected democratically and the remaining 20 seats elected by partner organisations, to ensure diversity and address the challenge of underrepresentation. She highlighted the youth-friendly electoral system, featuring online voting and rapid registration, and noted that the WYP crafted its own work programme, with this term’s focus including the cost-of-living crisis, public transport, and crime and safety. She reported that committee discussions had contributed to a variety of Senedd enquiries and consultations. She outlined key experiences of WYP Members including Ministerial engagement, a joint session of Parliament with the Senedd, and the presentation of public reports to Welsh Government, including the £1 bus ticket initiative for 16-21 year olds.

Gwion Rhisiart recounted his experience as a WYP member and noted the diverse backgrounds of members. He highlighted the importance of lived experience in successfully influencing significant policies, such as the Welsh Government’s mental health strategy and educational reform.

Discussion

Delegates noted that the impact of the WYP had not yet influenced voter turnout for 16/17-year-olds, however it was expected that moving to automatic registration in Wales would assist in addressing this issue. It was highlighted that, while young people are engaged in political issues, they may not connect these causes to democratic parties or elections. Better political education to relate elections to modern life was recommended.

Delegates noted the impact of future changes to Senedd elections. The status of WYP reports and their standing in government procedures was raised, which led to a suggestion of a review of Standing Orders to further formalise the relationship between the two Parliaments. Delegates supported the introduction of a system to compare youth parliaments to monitor their success and facilitate the exchange of good practice.

Day 1

Delegates chose between two workshops looking at inclusion in parliaments of LGBT+ voices and persons with disabilities:

Workshop A: “The importance of LGBT+ voices in Parliament”

This workshop drew on the lived perspectives of equality campaigners and legislators who have worked across party lines to champion inclusion. It explored the impact of authentic representation on legislation and how to safeguard those delivering change. Adam Price MS (Wales) opened the session and highlighted the importance of LGBT+ visibility in Parliament.

Jamie Green MSP (Scotland) addressed the challenge of sustaining representative leadership when political winds shift. He recognised the work done by previous politicians to champion LGBT rights, particularly in their push for LGBT cross party groups. Previous topics of cross-party group work included diversity inclusion in the curriculum, ending conversion therapy and Gender Recognition Reform. Jamie Green MSP acknowledged that being LGBT+ could be a big barrier to political entry for some people and that role models were integral to this process. He concluded that whilst many debates had been incredibly divisive, it was crucial to lead by example with cross party work when speaking about LGBT issues.

Hon. Graziella Attard Previ (Malta) acknowledged the difficulty of sustaining progress for LGBT+ rights, particularly when traditional values continued to impede discussions on diversity. She acknowledged the introduction of strong equality laws and cross-party support for LGBT rights in the Maltese Parliament but noted that there were no openly out politicians and supportive Members had continued to face backlash. She put emphasis on the responsibility of parties to train, deliver outreach and hold leadership initiatives to tackle this.



Photo credit: CPA Wales

Hon. Attard Previ noted the importance of humanising policy through the lived realities of parliamentarians. She concluded that Parliaments needed to promote rather than tolerate diversity, particularly while same sex relationships are still criminalised in 35 Commonwealth countries.

Day 1

Hannah Blythyn MS (Wales) reflected on her candidacy and the conscious decision taken by parliamentarians to be visible and “honest and open in politics”. She recalled the dearth of role models available to her as a young woman and cited a moving interaction with two young boys who felt her visibility had helped them. She explained that she felt a duty to serve the LGBT people of Wales and anchor the next generation. The impact of lived experience on policy-making was reiterated alongside the importance of cross-party work. Adam Price MS (Wales) noted that parliamentarians could disagree with policy, but personal stories invited people to have a different kind of conversation and thus recentred the focus.

Hon. Christian Santos (Gibraltar) outlined his experience as the first out Minister in the Gibraltar Parliament. As a faith-based community, Gibraltar had progressed significantly over the last 14 years but Hon. Santos emphasised the importance of educating communities to understand that LGBT+ politicians served the whole community, regardless of their sexuality. He spoke of the need to vocalise against the global pushback on LGBT+ rights and noted that many political parties were not represented at Pride events this year due to anger at LGBT+ erosion. He warned of the quick fall from leadership that could occur as a result.

Discussion

Delegates discussed the dual importance of legislation and education in bringing more diversity into parliament. They noted the strong example set by the region but agreed that belief systems could not be forced upon others. Delegates expressed their allyship for the LGBT+ community and noted that support should be harnessed from all areas, particularly where there was a lack of LGBT+ voices. The panel drew on the necessity of being visible when change was still needed and posed the question: “if we can’t stand up as parliamentarians, how can we ask for our allies to do so”?



Photo credit: CPA Wales

Day 1

Workshop B: “How can Parliaments enable effective and full participation of persons with disabilities at all levels”

People with disabilities are underrepresented in every Parliament in the region; in the UK 20% of the population having some form of disability. This session explored how Parliaments could address this lack of representation and navigate the barriers to accessibility in political spaces, while also capitalising on the opportunities now and going forward.

This workshop sought to underline that Parliaments, parties and society as a whole create the barriers which restrict the inclusion of disabled people. It was noted that ableism, ignorance and tradition sustain barriers of entry into political spaces, and with inclusion comes a sense of favour rather than this being seen as an imperative for achieving institutional equity. The culpability of political parties was recognised as they contributed to inaccessibility through barriers such as venue accessibility, lack of accessible materials, the nature of some political activities (such as canvassing), and a general lack of awareness from those within political parties. It was agreed that these accessibility failures resulted in a loss of talent and ambition.

The impact of parliaments on disabled representation was also discussed. It was agreed that parliaments needed to lead by example and ensure persons with disabilities are embedded into working processes. It was noted that reasonable adjustments could conflict with spending demands and, in the case of certain parliaments, with traditions of the buildings. In addition, rigid adjustments could still restrict access.



Photo credit: CPA Wales

Delegates looked beyond legislative means and advocated for honest and continuous dialogue with persons with disabilities to understand their needs. Legislation would need to encourage accountability of those who have a responsibility to meet the needs of persons with disabilities. Delegates championed a multifaceted approach which included improving physical accessibility, addressing attitudinal barriers and stigma, and promoting equity. Most importantly it was acknowledged that persons with disabilities need to be involved across the board, beginning at the grassroots level within political parties. The need to share good practice and to access and promote existing support was seen as integral to bettering representation.

Day 1

Plenary 2: “Supporting the Mental Health and Wellbeing of Parliamentarians”

This plenary addressed key themes relating to mental health in parliaments, including the mental illness burden and mental health stressors in the parliamentary workplace. Dr Leandri Hattingh, a contributor to the CPA Mental Health Toolkit and mental health expert, outlined key messages from the Toolkit. The panel shared mental health case studies and good practice in the workplace.

The panel set out why mental health matters, looking at the global prevalence of mental illness and the stigma that continued to deter those needing support. A 2016 report found that over 40% MPs had experienced poor mental health and almost all had someone close to them with mental health issues. The panel identified key stressors for parliamentarians and proposed a tiered support system in response. Key stressors were divided into three levels: Macro (cultural) stressors such as public distrust and media pressure, Meso (Institutional) stressors such as toxic leadership and short political cycles, and Micro (Individual) stressors such as long hours and poor work-life balance.

Structured support was identified to help reduce the stressors, involving primary prevention to build resilience and reduce risks, secondary intervention to encourage early detection and response, and tertiary support through rehabilitation, recovery and support back to work. Practical support ranged from mental health surveys to increased induction and training for new MPs, as well as support when leaving office. The panel also discussed organisational tools such as Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs) and peer support champions.

Deputée Marie-Louise Tardif (Québec) outlined the mental health support provided for Québec’s National Assembly Members, including off-site psychologists for privacy and counsellors for MPs and their families. She noted the respect accorded to parliamentarians’ mental health, as well as the family-friendly policies and drop-in daycare. She outlined the many wellbeing initiatives in place, including an end to routine night sessions and the introduction of virtual mental health breaks.



Photo credit: CPA Wales

Day 2

Launch of BIMR LGBT+ Network Event

The BIMR LGBT+ Network launch was opened by Regional Secretary Sarah Dickson and Llywydd Elin Jones MS. They celebrated its important presence in regional activities.

Rt Hon. David Mundell MP (UK) spoke of the importance of visibility. He noted that it was a regional Network but allies from outside the region could also engage. Deputy Louise Doublet (Jersey) highlighted the need to work with allies and the importance of the network in encouraging candidates to stand for election. She addressed the issue of bi invisibility and the struggle for inclusion, both in and outside parliament.

Stephen Twigg shared feedback that CPA should be more proactive on human rights but noted the challenges of different legal contexts and the need to work by consensus. He championed the promotion of good practice and raised the importance of partnerships. He highlighted the establishment of an online platform for LGBT+ parliamentarians.

Adam Price MS (Wales) raised the legacy of Lord Chris Smith, the first openly LGBT Member of parliament in the Commonwealth. He noted that lived experience was integral and collective work would help, as sharing stories creates dialogue. He cited the progress being made, despite the backlash at present.



Photo credit: CPA Wales

Day 2

Workshop C: Changing the Rules of Engagement: How modern parliamentarians are engaging in an evolving digital landscape

This workshop looked at the use of social media and emerging technologies among elected Members as part of their engagement with the electorate. Discussion focused on innovative use of digital platforms and changes in social media habits, including withdrawing from online platforms. Delyth Jewell MS (Wales) opened the session and reflected on the changing digital landscape, with emphasis on the disempowerment that could result from online abuse or backlash.

Hon. Khaled Sayed (Western Cape, South Africa) spoke of the conflict between social media as an essential tool of engagement and the historic inequalities it could exacerbate. He noted that his parliament's hybrid parliamentary proceedings had enabled the wider public to join online but was unable to reach the rural villages and townships that are without internet. In addition, the bombardment of fake news and polarised debates had led to many switching off and turning to local leaders. Hon. Sayed proposed combining social media engagement with face-to-face meetings and raised the importance of youth engagement and youth-centred spaces. He concluded that digital tools were powerful but that communities must come first.

Sarah Boyack MSP (Scotland) addressed the change in communication over the years and the opportunities digital platforms had provided for parliamentarians. She highlighted Covid's impact on online engagement, as communication became more accessible for rural constituents and offered flexibility to those with families or responsibilities. However, she noted the risk of exclusion for low-income households.

Sarah Boyack MSP raised the issue of abuse on social media, particularly misogyny and threatening behaviour. She emphasised the need to share good practice, such as mental health initiatives for Members and their staff, as different legislatures have different challenges. She cited the "Parliament Citizen Space" platform in the Scottish Parliament, a monitored public forum which provides an opportunity to connect with members of the public outside of traditional social media. There had also been a pilot project over the last year to support MSPs to monitor abuse. Delyth Jewell MS (Wales) noted the responsibility of companies to make online platforms safe. She highlighted the prevalent threats toward women parliamentarians and raised the importance of social media education in tackling this issue.

Day 2

Discussion

It was noted that online engagement was complicated by the diversity of social media platforms and user demographic. Delegates called for further legislation to protect users and raise awareness of online abuse. The positive side of social media was recognised, particularly for youth engagement and young voters. It was noted that engagement could be labour intensive, although AI could assist. Delegates concluded that budgets and resources should be optimised for social media engagement.

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Photo credit: CPA Wales

Workshop D: AI in Parliaments – Implementation, Training and Oversight

This workshop explored the role of AI in a parliamentary context, focusing on current uses of generative AI tools, opportunities and potential risks, as well as future application. It highlighted practical use cases where AI was already proving helpful for parliamentarians, such as drafting speeches, responding to constituent's questions, translating content, summarising documents, and improving accessibility through video content and bilingual tools. Steve Aiken MLA (NI) opened the session and noted that, despite the advancement of AI, humanity and empathy would remain at the centre of human experience.

The panel considered different approaches to rolling out AI tools, focusing on the Senedd's current initiatives, including ongoing Copilot trials, clear internal data protections, and focus on AI Governance and AI opportunity exploration. Arwyn Jones, Director of Communications and Engagement at the Senedd, explained that Copilot training has been offered through both internal IT sessions and Microsoft-led workshops specific for parliamentarians.

Day 2

Alun Davies MS (Wales) explored risks, spanning ethical concerns like environmental impact and bias, workforce challenges such as job displacement and reduced intellectual engagement, and broader threats to privacy, democracy, and civil discourse. Opportunities were also discussed, including AI's potential to enhance constituent services, improve accessibility, and serve as a powerful support tool.

Looking ahead, the discussion emphasised the importance of using AI as a responsible tool. It was agreed that AI was here to stay, so the focus must shift to ensuring strong governance, laws, and ethical guidelines. Human accountability and authenticity should remain critical, especially for parliamentarians. The workshop concluded with a commitment to continuing the regional digital transformation working group and highlighted that the future must also include better training and support for parliamentarians on how to use AI effectively and ethically.



Photo credit: CPA Wales

Acknowledgements

Closing Address

Delegates were welcomed to the Senedd by Deputy Presiding Officer, David Rees MS, for a Gala Dinner which concluded the Conference. It was formally closed with closing remarks from CPA Senedd Chair, Rhun ap Iorwerth MS.



Photo credit: CPA Wales

Acknowledgements

With thanks to the Llywydd Elin Jones MS, CPA Senedd Chair Rhun ap Iorwerth MS, Senedd Clerk and Chief Executive Manon Antoniazzi and the many Senedd Members and staff for their commitment to delivering the 2025 CPA BIMR Conference and for their unswerving hospitality.

With special thanks to CPA Senedd Secretary Al Davies and Elin Sutton who worked tirelessly to plan and deliver an interactive and stimulating conference.



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