



12th Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians British Islands and Mediterranean Region Conference

8-10 February 2026



The CPA Northern Ireland Branch hosted the 12th CPA British Islands and Mediterranean Conference at Stormont from 8-10 February 2026.

The conference theme, Power and Peace: Protecting our mental health in public life, provided an important and timely space for reflection, dialogue and collaboration to consider some of the challenges faced by women in political life, to share experiences, and to working together to identify practical, sustainable solutions which can support wellbeing.

The following delegates attended:

Guernsey	Deputy Kazantseva-Miller Deputy Jayne Ozanne Eliot Gallienne (Staff)
Isle of Man	Michelle Haywood MHK Ann Corlett MHK Louise Trimble (Staff)
Malta	Graziella Attard Previ MP Davina Sammut Hili MP
Northern Ireland	Michelle McIlveen MLA Kellie Armstrong MLA
Sark	Conseiller Carol Cragoe Conseiller Natalie Tighe
Scotland	Roz McCall MSP Sarah Boyack MSP Charlotta Craig (Staff)
UK	Baroness [Margaret] Curran Paulette Hamilton MP Dr Beccy Cooper MP Sarah Dickson (Staff) Helen Haywood (Staff)
Wales	Rhiannon Passmore MS Sioned Williams MS Sian Stoodley (Staff)
Additional Guests	Catherine Fife, Legislature of Ontario, CWP Chair Avni Kondhia, CWP Coordinator, CPA Secretariat Leanne Spencer, Keynote Speaker Kerry McWilliams, Speaker Stephanie Heckman, Graphic Artist

Day One

On the evening of Sunday 8 February delegates assembled for an informal reception, at which CWP Representative for the CPA British Islands and Mediterranean Region Deputy Sasha Kazantseva Miller MP launched the **BIMR CWP Mentoring Scheme**. The scheme will be trialled for a year, and Deputy Kazantseva Miller called for mentors to share knowledge and experience and to provide camaraderie and perspective. She answered questions on the scheme and listened to advice on how to successfully take it forward.

Day Two

President of the CPA Northern Ireland Branch **Speaker Edwin Poots** opened the Conference in the Assembly Chamber. He thanked delegates for bringing their experience and highlighted the valuable opportunity to share ideas and good practice. He pointed to the International Strategy being developed by the Northern Ireland Assembly to strengthen parliament by being informed by shared learning. He noted that parliamentarians are now in touch with their constituents 24 hours a day, and that women parliamentarians are disproportionately subject to social media abuse. He acknowledged the responsibility of parliaments to support their members from a welfare perspective. He thanked delegates for bringing their expertise.

CWP Representative for the CPA Northern Ireland Branch **Michelle McIlveen MLA** welcomed delegates attending for the first time as well as those with longstanding experience. She explained that the theme of the Conference was **Power and Peace; protecting our mental health in Public Life**. She highlighted the balance of privilege and challenge embodied by the role of elected officials and the cumulative toll which had to be processed by everyone individually.

She thanked CWP Chair Catherine Fife for attending and for her valuable leadership and commitment to working towards the CWP's objectives. She hoped that the Conference would provide a supportive, reflective and solutions-focused space. She explained the goal of drafting a pledge for women in public life; a commitment shared by all conference attendees.

CWP Regional Representative for the CPA British Islands and Mediterranean Region **Deputy Sasha Kazantseva-Miller** thanked Speaker Poots, Michelle McIlveen and the Northern Ireland Assembly team for hosting their first BIMR CWP conference in the unique and historical setting of Stormont. She highlighted the paradox of power and peace, and the need to step into that balance for sustainability in public service. She spoke of the opportunity to establish relationships and connections; sharing whilst preserving confidentiality.

Keynote Speaker: Leanne Spencer 'Holding Power without Losing Yourself'

Life Coach Leanne Spencer presented on Mastering the high-performance paradox, starting with illustrating various paradoxes, including the self-neglecting leader. She summarised her personal journey including the establishment of her coaching business by recognising what her personal training clients wanted was not necessarily what they needed. They wanted more information but did not necessarily know what to do with it. She talked about building a paradox mindset, which was needing something to get something else.

She set out the four pillar to build and sustain resilience which are **Values**, and clear sense of **Identity**, a close **Community** and **Resources** that support resilience. She illustrated this

through the 'Action Paradox' – being bothered to do the little things, which can become big things. 'We know what we can do but are not necessarily doing it'. She invited the Conference delegates to consider various questions and to share their responses to explore the four pillars:

Values

- What principle are you unwilling to compromise on even it is inconvenient or costly?
- When you have felt proud of yourself and what values were you honouring in that moment?

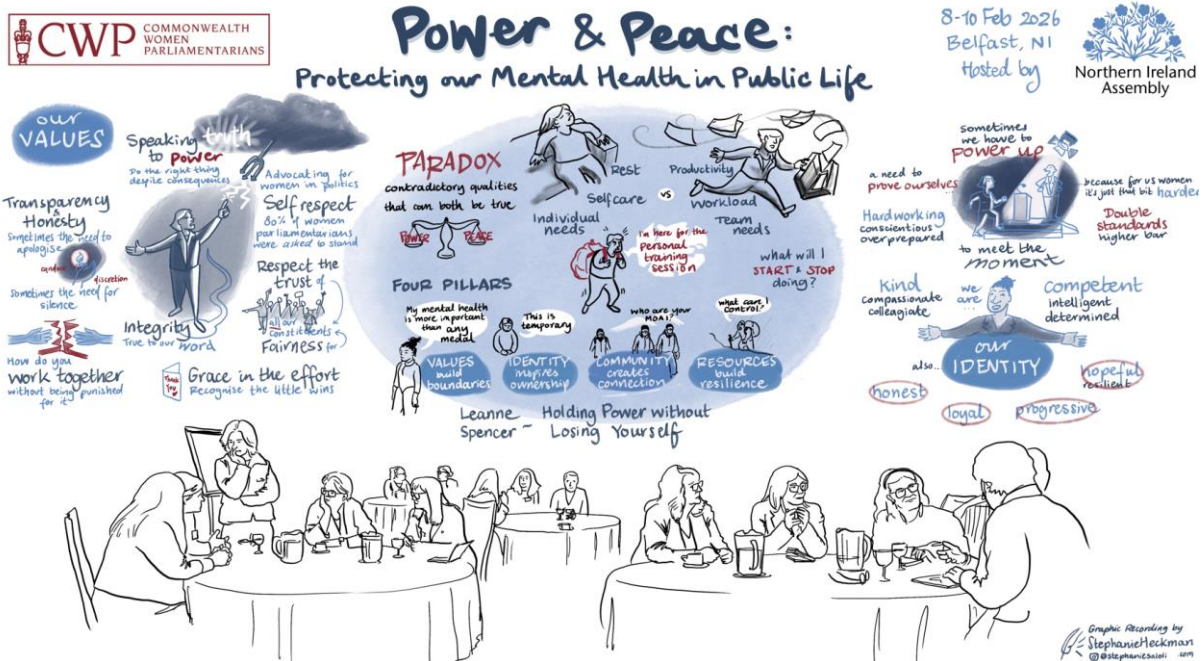
Identity

- What three words would you like others to describe you? Do your daily actions reflect that?
- When have you felt most in your element? What were you doing? What strengths were you using?

Community & Resources

- Are you building habits today that will hold steady when life gets unpredictable or are you waiting for something to happen to force a change?
- Thinking about the ultimate paradox, what will you start doing today? Commit to 1/2/3 daily non-negotiables that keep you well.

Leanne Spencer responded to the feedback from group discussions. She encouraged putting into practice positive ideas to develop good habits and suggested some tools to help mitigate bad ones.



Panel Discussion: Mental Health and Emotional Labour with Judith Gillespie, Leanne Spencer, Joanne Bunting MLA. Led by Sarah Travers.

Sarah Travers facilitated a conversation with the panellists.

Judith Gillespie spoke about her time working for the Police Service of Northern Ireland and the lessons she had learned. She started by noting that not all leaders are in high-ranking positions and that we are all leaders. She structured her remarks around the four Vs and how she had learned to deal with different aspects of her role. For example, for **visibility**, when being the focal point it was important to buy some time away from other people to order your thoughts. She talked about staying true to your **values**, which made decisions easier to make and implement. For **vision**, she recommended being clear in your purpose of where you want to go. The last 'V' was **vitality** and was about being optimistic and believing you can make a difference. She finished by underlining the five 'Fs' to underpin the 'Vs' which for her were faith, family, fitness, friends and fun.

Joanne Bunting MLA set out her journey as a staffer at Stormont to being elected as Member of the Legislative Assembly. She spoke about how she prepared for her work by reading everything and doing a lot of homework beforehand, so she was always ready. Her experience in the Whips Office had given valuable experience of navigating a crisis and she felt well prepared for elected office; however, the reality of it had hit her hard resulting in paralysing fear, self-doubt and not feeling equipped to live up to the faith people had put in her. Despite navigating this, she had become a committee chair, chief whip and was now a junior minister. She continues constantly to try and prove herself which she finds exhausting. She advised not to let the fear sap the joy. Her belief that she should not show any weakness meant hiding an illness preventing possible mitigations to help manage it, and which led to further health impacts. Whilst acknowledging that her experiences were the nature of the political arena, the challenges were multilayered.

Leanne Spencer advised to set basic minimum boundaries which must not be crossed, accepting that human life can be messy and you will be pulled over, but ensuring that the next day you put the boundary back. She believed that society is starting to change slowly and that it was everyone's responsibility to make things better. Suggested boundaries included:

- taking control of your diary and limiting the number of evenings a week you are prepared to work
- making sure you take your leave
- Do not underestimate the value of small wins - a **sliver of recovery**
- Take criticism seriously but not personally accepting the disagreement comes with the turf, but recognising a red line when it becomes defamation and abuse.

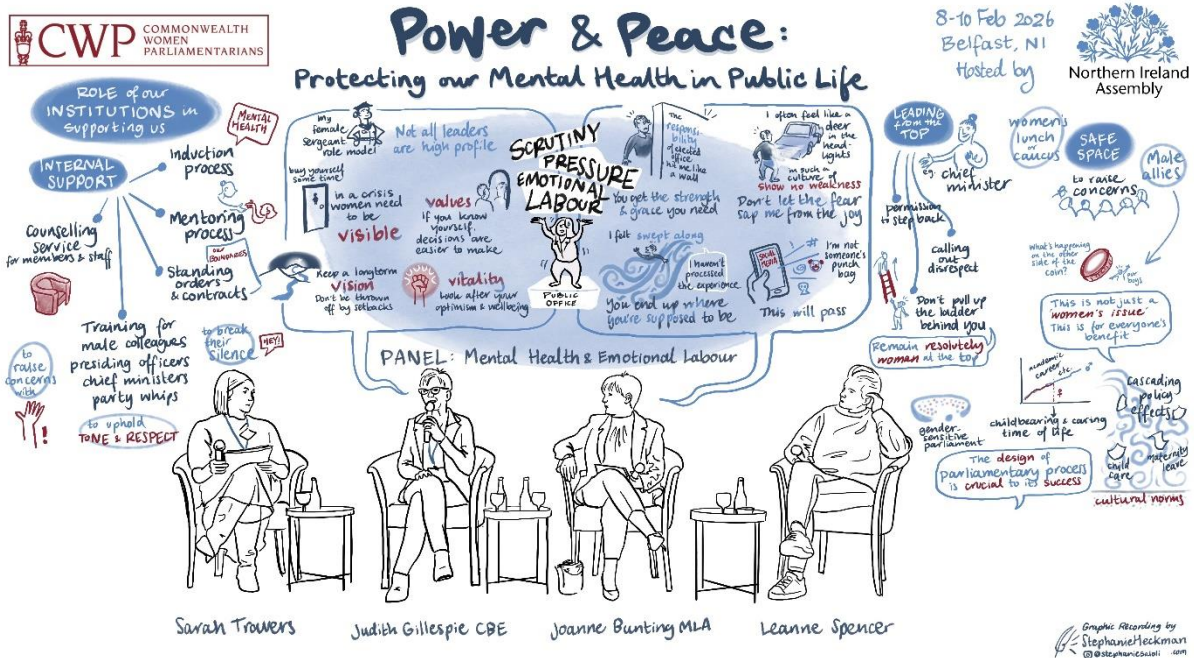
Advice on social media covered:

- Don't read comments.
- Keep your social media a positive space.
- Curate what you share and be strict about what and when.
- Mute, flag, block.

The discussion covered the need for male allies, and doing more to show them life in the shoes of a female colleague. In one case cited a female and male colleague had swapped social media accounts which had subsequently encouraged the male colleague to be more proactive

when witnessing the gendered nature of online abuse. Safe interventions by men and boys benefit everyone.

The session closed with the recommendation **to take one action to stabilise you as a leader.**



The final session was group discussions, led by Sarah Travers focussing on:

The Role of Institutions in supporting work-life boundaries and coping mechanisms.

Cultural and Leadership Norms. What responsibility do institutions have for setting a more supportive tone.

Discussion feedback noted the role of presiding officers in setting the tone of debate. In one parliament the Speaker had meetings with party leaders to set the tone for it to be non-toxic. The group questioned how many Presiding Officers have relevant training and how can parliamentarians hold Presiding Officers to account if culture and tone slips. The group called for a non-partisan approach to the promotion of opportunities for family friendly working. They advocated for Presiding Officers in different parliaments to come together to discuss their responsibilities to their members.

How institutions can empower women parliamentarians to speak up about pressures on wellbeing and what parliamentary leaders can do to make them feel safe and legitimate and not judged.

The group asked how to empower all parliamentarians to speak out and the importance of leading from the top and setting a tone. They valued having senior woman to go to. They discussed having permission to step back when needed and not feeling guilty about doing so, pointing to guilt as a trap. They highlighted that behaviour should be referenced in parliamentary Standing Orders and needing the right tools in place to call out bad behaviour.

They highlighted a conspiracy of silence where things were not talked about. In terms of their own responsibilities the group spoke about not pulling up the ladder on other women when you have got there, being that leader for other women to turn to and not putting up with things – setting that good example.

Practical institutional action. To support women’s mental health in public life. Not relying on resilience.

The group proposed the introduction of dedicated counselling services for parliamentarians, recognising the significant pressures associated with public office. Mentoring programmes were highlighted as a practical and effective form of support, offering structured guidance and peer connection.

Participants recommended that mental health awareness be explicitly incorporated into parliamentary induction processes. They noted, however, that not all parliaments currently operate a formal induction system, representing a gap in support which should be addressed.

The group advocated for raising the profile of mental health within parliamentary culture. This included increasing visibility, normalising conversations about wellbeing, and creating an environment in which seeking support is accepted and encouraged. Embedding mental health considerations into organisational culture was seen as an important step towards making wellbeing a recognised and integral part of parliamentary life.

The Future. To encourage women to enter public life and to stay, and how does mental wellbeing support that?

The group emphasised that support initiatives should not focus exclusively on women. Participants highlighted the broader underrepresentation of several groups, including young people, LGBTQ+ individuals, and people with disabilities, noting the need for more comprehensive pipeline-building strategies. Ensuring diversity among prospective candidates was considered essential.

A significant issue identified was the impact of childcare and childbearing responsibilities during key stages of women’s lives. This was described as a fundamental factor contributing to the greatest difference in career progression between men and women in parliamentary environments. Evidence indicates that male and female career trajectories remain broadly similar until the point at which women choose to have children, at which stage a marked divergence occurs.

Members of the group called for a critical examination of how parliaments and other democratic institutions are designed. Current structures, such as constituency demands and late parliamentary sittings, were viewed as setting many individuals, particularly women, at a disadvantage. However, it was noted that smaller jurisdictions within the region may offer healthier working arrangements and more favourable work–life balance opportunities.

Institutional support was identified as crucial, with gender-sensitive audits highlighted as an important tool for analysing parliamentary practices.

Whilst participants recognised that the region is significantly ahead of many international counterparts in terms of gender representation, they agreed that childcare remains a core issue. Until childcare provision is adequately addressed, meaningful progress will remain limited.

Overall, the group observed that change is occurring, but at a notably slow pace.

At a dinner that evening **CWP Chair Catherine Fife MP** (CPA Ontario Branch) addressed the Conference, updating on the activities of the CWP network and in particular highlighting its work on tackling online abuse of MPs.

Day 2

Kerry McWilliams: Sustaining Women's Leadership Under Pressure

Kerry McWilliams began by posing the question: Can leadership as currently structured be sustainable for us? She asked why women burn out so often, as it is statistically proven that they do. Her aim for the session was that participants would begin to recognise what might help scaffold them as women leaders, by setting out some examples of emotional regulation. She observed that women enter politics with capability and commitment and they have systematic sustainability issues rather than a resilience deficit.

Kerry McWilliams highlighted examples of female leadership from the animal kingdom. Bonobos display female coalition relationships. Elephants, have matriarchal leadership (and ancestral memory). Orcas have grandmother leadership – and is the only other species than humans to go through menopause. They display patterns of behaviour, which is socialised, selected and reinforced.

The Structural Challenge

Our political systems encourage reward, adversarial dominance, constant availability, aggression and performative conflict and short-term wins.

There is a dichotomy with female leadership strengths which often include coalition building under pressure, de-escalation without weakness or capitulation and long-term thinking.

This mismatch leads to burnout or chronic workplace stress. We either change structures – or try to successfully manage the status quo.

Kerry McWilliams began by outlining the concept of an individual's "frame of reference," describing it as the lens through which people perceive and interpret the world around them. Understanding this personal frame is a foundation for improving self-awareness and interpersonal interactions.

Introducing the *polyvagal ladder*, Kerry McWilliams explained its relevance in supporting emotional regulation and resilience. She emphasised the importance of emotional intelligence and somatic awareness, noting that recognising early physical signals of dysregulation, such as through body-mapping techniques, can help intervention before stress responses escalate.

A range of practical regulation tools were described. Kerry McWilliams highlighted controlled breathing as a core technique, lengthening the exhale relative to the inhale, and introducing resistance during the exhalation.

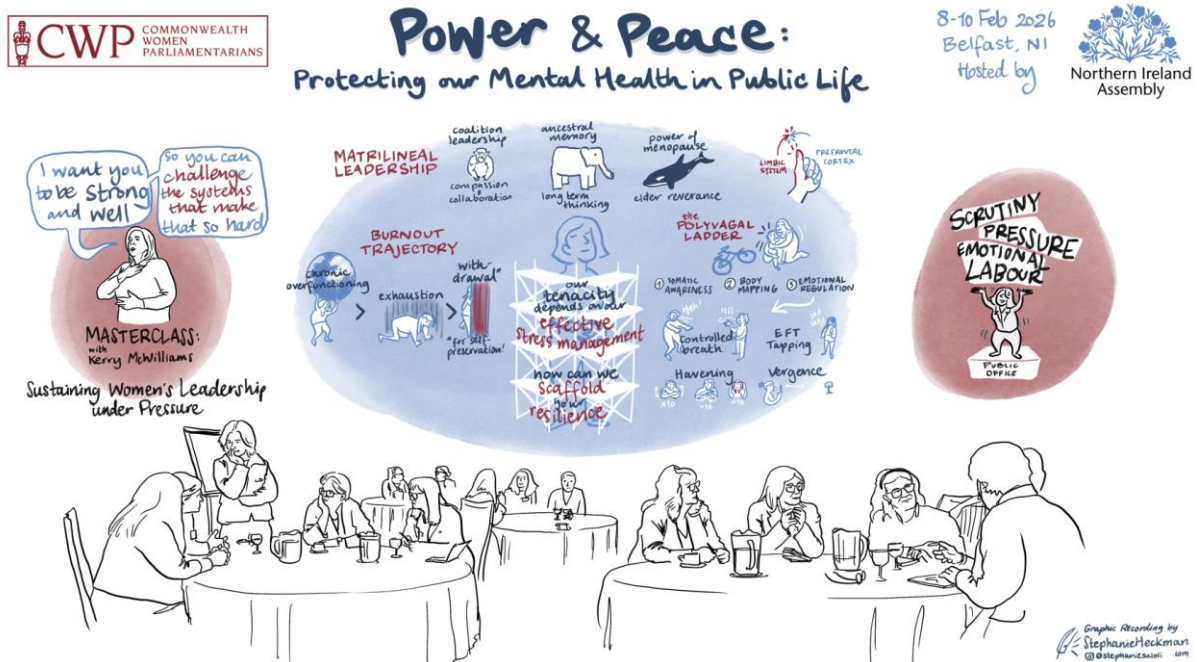
The session also covered the Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT or "tapping"), as well as the Self-Havening routine, which involves:

- **Arms:** stroking from shoulders to elbows (10 repetitions)
- **Hands:** circular movements as though rolling a marble (10 repetitions)
- **Face:** tracing a heart-shaped motion from the forehead to the chin (10 repetitions)

Kerry McWilliams also discussed the oculocardiac reflex, describing how activating this reflex can slow heart rate, interrupt impulsive reactions, and help deactivate panic responses.

Participants were encouraged to identify their own preferred regulation style whether grounded in movement, expressive activity, or stillness and to develop an awareness of the differing regulation preferences of others, which was important for improving communication and supporting constructive interaction.

Kerry McWilliams concluded by stressing the importance of remaining within existing systems to influence positive change. She highlighted the value of nervous-system regulation, and the timeliness of intervention to prevent escalation.



Throughout the Conference graphic artist and visual facilitator Stephanie Heckman translated in real-time collective conversations into hand-drawn visual summaries which distil the essence of both content and undercurrent. She presented her drawings back to the delegates and they are shown throughout this report.

The Wellbeing Pledge for Women in Public Life

Power & Peace: Protecting Our Mental Health

Developed at the 12th Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians British Islands and Mediterranean Regional Conference, Belfast

This pledge affirms that protecting mental and physical wellbeing is key to effective leadership, democratic resilience, and public trust. It reflects the shared experiences, priorities, and collective intent of women parliamentarians gathered in Belfast, and recognises the role of institutions in shaping cultures in which women's contribution is supported, valued, and sustained enabling women to lead with confidence and sustainability.

Our Commitments

As women in public life, and as institutions which shape political culture, we commit to the following principles:

Theme 1: Respect, Credibility, and Institutional Culture

We recognise that confidence and credibility in public life are shaped by culture, visibility, and respect. We commit to upholding fairness, transparency, and honesty within our institutions, and to challenging behaviours and norms which undermine women's authority or dignity, including the collective responsibility of parliamentarians to call out unacceptable conduct.

Theme 2: Resilience, Pressure, and Sustainability

We recognise that resilience alone is not a sustainable response to the pressures of public life, and we commit to promoting leadership cultures that value work life balance and encourage long-term wellbeing.

Theme 3: Boundaries, Self-Leadership, and Permission

We commit to creating cultures in which boundaries are respected, support can be sought without stigma, and women are empowered to make conscious decisions which protect wellbeing, including the permission to step back, say no, or let something go.

From Commitment to Action

This pledge is intended to support reflection, strengthen dialogue, and stimulate practical change across diverse parliamentary contexts. In different roles and institutions, this may involve shaping leadership culture, strengthening safe and trusted support mechanisms, making wellbeing more visible, addressing harmful behaviours, and sharing learning and good practice across parliaments and assemblies.

Declaration

By endorsing this pledge, we affirm our shared responsibility to protect mental and physical wellbeing in public life and to contribute to political cultures in which women can lead with both power and peace.

Deputy Sasha Kazantseva Miller addressed the persistent barriers faced by female parliamentarians in attending international conferences, recognising that while these challenges are multifaceted, a key theme consistently raised by women related to the limited availability of family-friendly facilities and childcare support. She noted that conferences of this nature are intended to serve as capacity-building opportunities, however, if structural barriers, especially those related to caring responsibilities, remained unaddressed, participation will continue to be uneven. She emphasised that any approach must take account of safeguarding considerations, and that the organisation cannot itself take responsibility for childcare provision. Even so, there were practical steps that could significantly improve access, for example, clear signposting information, such as identifying hotels that are more family-friendly or that offer suitable family support services.

She cited the example of one of the CPA Canada region's branches which had developed a programme specifically designed for spouses and children. This was entirely self-funded and not subsidised by the state, but the initiative proved successful and contributed to record attendance at the Conference, demonstrating the strong draw of a more inclusive approach. She noted that implementing such a programme required significant work and would depend on decisions taken at the local branch level.

Deputy Kazantseva Miller stressed that these considerations extend beyond women alone and apply to parliamentarians with a range of family circumstances, including single parents and nursing mothers.

More broadly, she encouraged a wider conversation about how to improve inclusion across all delegations through better resource provision and information-sharing. The financial barriers associated with attending conferences, particularly the costs of leaving children at home, remained a substantial obstacle for many. Addressing these challenges, even partially, would help ensure that conferences truly reflect the diversity of the parliamentary community.

She undertook to share these insights with the CPA Secretariat as part of ongoing efforts to promote equitable participation in future CPA events.

Deputy Kazantseva-Miller extended delegates' warmest gratitude to the Northern Ireland Assembly team for an excellent conference, for the innovative theme and programme and first-rate contributors.

She thanked CWP Chair Catherine Fife for attending and her contribution, hoping that she had formed a good impression of CWP in the CPA British Islands and Mediterranean Region, which was active with a strong sense of purpose. She thanked member of the BIMR CWP Steering Committee for their commitment in driving CWP's work through their branches.

She finished by noting that Sarah Boyack MSP (Scotland) was not standing for re-election after many years of service. This would be huge loss, although she planned to continue to support women parliamentarians and fight for the issues CWP members feel so passionate about. She thanked Sarah Boyack for her huge contribution to CWP.

Deputy Sasha Kazantseva-Miller asked delegates to consider suggested topics for the 2026 Commonwealth Conference. The following suggestions were made, and were subsequently submitted for consideration:

Power & Peace: Examining leadership culture through a wellbeing lens.

Highlighting the importance of protecting mental health in public life and maintaining a balance to perform effectively in a fast-paced, high-pressure career. Identifying values, boundaries, networks and resources as the building blocks for self-care, and understanding the role institutions play in support of achieving 'power and peace'.

Understanding the ethical concerns of artificial intelligence and applicable legislative frameworks.

AI can amplify and perpetuate biases leading to discriminatory outcomes. In a landscape of engrained societal inequality, AI could exacerbate rather than improve equality and inclusion. In the fast-paced sphere of technological innovation law makers should be aware and informed of ethical concerns including data privacy, accountability, environmental and workforce impacts.

Parliamentarians putting ideas into action.

Considering case-studies of how parliamentarians have put interparliamentary learning into action through private members' bills, committees, parliamentary caucuses and all-party groups, campaigns, collaborating with NGOs and CSOs, lobbying parliamentary leadership and other examples of good practice which have achieved positive change.

Codes of Conduct and Behaviour Codes in our Parliaments.

Codifying the behaviour, we expect of our parliamentarians and making behaviour a key focus of parliamentary inductions. Empowering people to challenge unacceptable behaviour and exploring what tools can be used to expose code breaches and make parliaments safe spaces where poor behaviour is not tolerated.

Title. How can parliamentarians meaningfully engage with young people?

How to create successful platforms for interactions between young people and parliamentarians to leverage innovation and youth experience/perspective, and to reach and inspire those who are politically disengaged. Sharing learning on youth parliaments and youth select committees and other innovative forums to bridge the divide.

Closing remarks – Michelle McIlveen MLA

Michelle McIlveen MLA reflected on the value of the gathering, emphasising that the network provides an important space for parliamentarians to reconnect, share experiences honestly, and support one another. She warmly welcomed new participants, noting that the conference was designed to enable all delegates to contribute confidently to the discussions.

She explained that this year's structure was deliberately shaped to focus on outcomes and practical takeaways. The intention was a clear emphasis on substance, encouraging respectful, grounded conversations reflecting the realities of public life.

Michelle McIlveen highlighted the development of a wellbeing pledge. It would not be imposed or abstract; but rooted in the lived experiences of members and shaped by their collective judgement. The objective was to outline actions that make sense across different political and cultural contexts, while remaining meaningful.

She noted that many delegates were leaving with new ideas, renewed connections, and a strengthened appreciation for the value of the network. She underscored the importance of maintaining continuity, both formally through the CWP framework and informally through ongoing peer support.

Michelle McIlveen expressed her gratitude to the speakers, panellists, and Assembly staff for their contributions, and offered sincere thanks to the delegates for the seriousness, generosity, and mutual support they demonstrated throughout the programme. She concluded by expressing her enthusiasm for continuing this important work through the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) network.

