



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

10th British Islands and Mediterranean Region Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Conference

6-8 March 2024, Valletta, Malta



[Photo by Parliament of Malta]

Introduction

1. The [Commonwealth Parliamentary Association](#) (CPA) consists of 180 parliaments and legislatures across the world. The 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, St Helena, Scotland, Wales and the United Kingdom.
2. The [Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians](#) (CWP) is the network of women Members of the CPA's parliaments and legislatures. The CWP network provides a means of building the capacity of women elected to parliament to be more effective in their roles; improving the awareness and ability of all parliamentarians, male and female, and encouraging them to include a gender perspective in all aspects of their role - legislation, oversight, representation and helping parliaments to become gender-sensitive institutions.
3. The 10th BIMR CWP Conference took place in Valletta, Malta, from 6-9 March 2024. The theme of the conference was *Resilient Women - Moulding Girls into Strong Women* and the conference focused on how women are impacted by an array of circumstances, which calls for greater resilience. Sessions included *Issues and challenges affecting Women across the Commonwealth*; *Women under pressure: the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and cultural and societal inequality and discrimination*; and *Challenges of being a Woman Member of Parliament*. The conference also included an International CWP Strategy Discussion and *Women in Conversation*, which focused on sharing the female experience.
4. Furthermore, on International Women's Day, 8 March, there was a session called *Time for International Women's Day re-connections with local parliaments*, where parliaments across the region shared topics of interests highlighted by young women in their country. These were established through a group session taking place in each parliament. Two of the participants from the Scottish Parliament's group session took part remotely in the session on 8 March.
5. The conference brought together 42 delegates from the legislatures of Cyprus, Gibraltar, Guernsey, Isle of Man, Jersey, Malta, Northern Ireland, Scotland, United Kingdom and Wales, allowing them to share ideas and exchange good practice. Alderney, Falkland Islands and St Helena were unable to attend.
6. The delegation from the Scottish Parliament consisted of:
 - Sarah Boyack MSP, member of the Scotland Branch Executive Committee and Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians BIMR Steering Committee

- Michelle Thomson MSP, member of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians BIMR Steering Committee

Recommendations

7. Sarah Boyack MSP is intending to update the CWP BIMR Steering Committee on the impact of the Scottish Period Poverty Bill.
8. She is also intending to follow up discussions about how to get women elected- quotas, party selections, all women shortlists and ask if the organisation Elect Her has any capacity to support women in different legislatures.
9. Furthermore, she intends to feedback to the Scottish Youth Parliament the issues that were raised during the International Women's Day session.
10. She would also like to suggest that one of the young women writes an article for the CPA's Parliamentarian magazine to summarise the points they made.
11. Sarah Boyack MSP has written to the Chair of the CWP BIMR Steering Committee to ask if the feedback from the Young Women can be included in a session at the BIMR Conference in Saint Helena in May 2024.
12. Finally, she will include feedback from the young women at the CPA Scotland Branch AGM in September.
13. Michelle Thomson MSP referenced the meeting with the British High Commissioner in a letter to support petition PE1975 regarding Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPPs). She has since then obtained agreement from the Scottish Government that they will now consult on SLAPPs with a view to legislating.
14. Following the conference Sarah Boyack MSP spoke to the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament about the Women's caucus and celebrating 25 years of women MSPs.

Programme

Wednesday 6 March 2024

07.35 Depart Edinburgh (EDI)

09.10 Arrive London (LHR), Terminal 5

11.25 Depart London (LHR), Terminal 4

15.40 Arrive Malta (MLA)

Thursday 7 March 2024

08.30 CWP Steering Committee Meeting

- 10.10 Welcome Session and Official Opening of the CWP Conference
- 10.15 Plenary 1: Issues and challenges affecting Women across the Commonwealth
- 11.30 Plenary 2: Women under pressure: the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and cultural and societal inequality and discrimination
- 14.00 Plenary 3: Challenges of being a Woman Member of Parliament
- 15.45 CWP Round up from plenaries
- 16.00 International CWP Strategy Discussion
- 19.30 Dinner at the Grand Hotel Excelsior hosted by the Speaker of the House of Representatives, Hon. Angelo Farrugia

Friday 8 March 2024

- 09.00 Women in Conversation
- 11.30 Time for International Women's Day re-connections with local parliaments
- 15.30 Visit to the Commonwealth War Graves, Kalkara
- 17.30 Meeting with Katherine Ward LVO OBE, British High Commissioner to the Republic of Malta

Thursday 7 March 2024

BIMR CWP Steering Committee Meeting

- 15. In the morning of day one of the conference the BIMR CWP Steering Committee met to discuss upcoming regional business.
- 16. Maria Miller MP (UK), Chair, provided members with an update from the International CWP meeting. It was agreed that the region would support the suggestion that a CWP conference would take place at every Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference (CPC) rather than every three years as it is currently.
- 17. The group then discussed the programme for the CWP conference in Malta and upcoming CWP activities and programmes 2024/2025.
- 18. Finally, members provided an update on CWP related work in their Branches.
- 19. *"It was an excellent turnout from members of the Steering Committee. I think the discussions we were able to have about the CPA International and BIMR conferences was very useful. We also had a good update on what*

we had done since the December meeting to ensure that we had young women being able to input to our IWD event. I also raised the feedback we'd had from a visiting Australian parliamentarian who had made us aware of discrimination against women in the New South Wales legislature and the need to feed in to the next CPA International and BIMR conferences.”- Sarah Boyack MSP

20. *“It would have been recorded as an action, but I recall Rhianon Passmore raising the fact that we, as a group, will have to discuss our view of men identifying as women and their role with the CWP. I appreciate this is an issue that has proven to be difficult which makes most groups seek to avoid it. However, I come to this from a leadership perspective and simply note that this will come up again and we may have to discuss, even if we elect not to take a position”- Michelle Thomson MSP*



Welcome

21. The conference was opened by Hon. Angelo Farrugia, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Parliament of Malta.

22. *“The opening welcome speech by the Speaker of the Maltese Parliament Angelo Farrugia highlighted the global impact of war. I think it was a very good reminder of both the challenges we currently face and the importance of global relations and how we fit into those discussions as female parliamentarians.”- Sarah Boyack MSP*



[Photo by Parliament of Malta]

Plenary 1: Issues and challenges affecting Women across the Commonwealth

23. The first plenary of the conference was titled “Issues and challenges affecting Women across the Commonwealth”. The aim of the session was to identify global challenges, such as violence against women and girls, lack of women in leadership and the backlash against gender equality and women’s empowerment. The panel and participants considered international good practice in responding to these challenges.
24. The panel consisted of Honourable Katya DeGiovanni MP (Malta), Professor Carmen Sammut, Pro Rector of the University of Malta and lecturer in International Relations; Savia Orphanidou (Cyprus), Rt Hon Dame Maria Miller MP (UK) and Carolyn Labey (Jersey).
25. Topics discussed included the challenges of recruiting women and men into traditionally gender professions, the role of parliaments and education in empowering women, gender pay gaps, the importance of including men in the conversation, and financial literacy and inclusion.
26. *“The headline issues were that global conflicts have a massive impact on civilians and Gaza and Ukraine highlighted the issues of the loss of life, massive impacts on health and displacement particularly impacting women and children. The importance of conflict resolution and supporting recovery after war were highlighted. The need for a shift in mindset, for women to be leaders and to influence leadership, with legislatures enabling structural inequalities to be addressed, such as an intersectional approach, addressing misogyny, ensuring women have financial support and building*

cross societal approach involving key stakeholders and businesses.”- Sarah Boyack MSP



[Photo by Parliament of Malta]

Plenary 2: Women under pressure: the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and cultural and societal inequality and discrimination

27. The second plenary was titled “Women under pressure: the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and cultural and societal inequality and discrimination”. The session focused on scrutinising policy, legislation and budgets to identify the impact on women and girls; and highlighting discriminatory practices targeted at or disproportionately affecting women.
28. The panel was made up of Honourable Claudette Buttigieg MP (Malta); Hon. Rebecca Buttigieg MP, Parliamentary Secretary for Reforms and Equality (Malta), Sarah Boyack MSP (Scotland), Hon. Gemma Aria Vasquez (Gibraltar) and Julie Elliott MP (UK).
29. Topics discussed included work life balance and gender stereotypes, pension pay gap, the role of equality committees, childcare provision, gender representation on non-executive boards, the Scottish Period Poverty Bill, gender balance in parties, impact of the pandemic, flexible working and parental leave policies.
30. *“It was a good discussion. My focus was on the pressures of the cost-of-living crisis on young women which disproportionately affects women. With lack of access to affordable housing, the rising cost of childcare, access to which is critical if women are to be able to develop their careers, with a particular challenge for single parents, and the widening gender pay gap as women get older. I highlighted positive steps taken in the Scottish Parliament and the fact that since day one of the Parliament we’ve had a committee focused on equalities. The issues I cited where we’d made progress were on free childcare, 50:50 representation on Public Boards, the use of EQIAs and the legislation to provide free period products. I highlighted what more could be done and flagged that at the last elections several women did not stand again and that childcare was a key issue.”-* Sarah Boyack MSP

31. Sarah Boyack MSP is intending to update the CWP BIMR Steering Committee on the impact of the Scottish Period Poverty Bill.



[Photo by Parliament of Malta]

Plenary 3: Challenges of being Woman Member of Parliament

32. In the afternoon the session covered “Challenges of being Woman Member of Parliament”. The session provided members with an opportunity to discuss how parliaments are structured to meet the needs of women parliamentarians and to safeguard the mental and physical wellbeing of women members.
33. The panel was made up of Hon. Naomi Cachia (Malta), Michelle Thomson MSP (Scotland), Ann Corlett MHK (Isle of Man) and Janet Finch Saunders MS (Wales).
34. The panel and participants discussed the gender correction mechanism, which was introduced at the 2022 elections in Malta, public perception of women parliamentarians, childcare provisions, mentorships and leading by example, the need to change the institutions and not just fit into them, safety of members, including social media, and the challenging environment that women members work in and the impact this has on women standing for election.
35. *“I wanted to share a little of my journey in politics – not because I seek any sympathy, but instead to emphasise the need to focus on personal resilience, our collective duty of care as women parliamentarians, self-regulation and skills versus behaviour. I noted my belief that we can and should advocate for women in our parliaments, in our political parties and beyond. The session somewhat demonstrated some discord amongst the (younger) women parliamentarians in Malta. The more experienced were able to step back from their experience and reflect – and I hope that ability was evident.”* – Michelle Thomson MSP



[Photo by Parliament of Malta]

International CWP Strategy Discussion

36. During the International CWP Strategy Discussion, led by Maria Miller MP (Chair) and Rhiannon Passmore MS (Deputy Chair), the delegates discussed the International CWP's six objectives:

- To support the Commonwealth Parliaments on their gender sensitive journey.
- To build the capacity of women parliamentarians and enhance knowledge sharing amongst women and male parliamentarians.
- To strengthen the governance and enhance its engagement with the broader CPA.
- To be recognised as a leading international women's parliamentary network that promotes the success and experience of women in Commonwealth Parliaments to a wide audience.
- To find information and resources available for a pathway to politics pre-election period, election period and post-election.
- To develop the CPA/CWP's role in supporting women to access information or programmes.

37. Sarah Boyack MSP and Michelle Thomson MSP spoke about the Scottish Parliament's Gender Audit. The recommendations and issues highlighted by the research, highlighting the importance of it being an external academic who conducted the work and the data collection involved.

38. Other participants discussed how to feedback to current and new members after outward visits such as conferences, how to encourage more women to stand for election, and the importance of awareness raising.

39. The delegates also discussed possible CWP workshops for future CPCs.

40. *"This was a good session led by Maria Miller and Rhiannon Passmore. There was agreement that we needed to ensure that the issues, challenges and solutions that had been discussed at the conference needed to be fed into the wider CWP discussions."* - Sarah Boyack MSP

41. **Sarah Boyack MSP is intending to follow up discussions about how to get women elected- quotas, party selections, all women shortlists and**

ask if the organisation Elect Her has any capacity to support women in different legislatures.

Friday 8 March 2024

Women in Conversation

42. On International Women's Day the conference began the day with a session called *Women in Conversation*. The aim of the session was to allow participants to share experiences in a free, frank, uninhibited way.
43. The panel included Hon. Graziella Attard Previ (Malta); Helena Dalli, EU Commissioner for Equality, H.E. Marie Louise Coleiro Preca, Former President of the Republic of Malta, and Hon. Paula Mifsud Bonnici, Women Political Leader Country Ambassador (Alternate) (Malta). The panel was also joined by various Maltese female members as well as two representatives from the National Youth Council of Malta.
44. [Helena Dalli, EU Commissioner for Equality](#) spoke about the gender pay gap, lack of improvements in legislation relating to violence against women, attracting more women into science and technology professions, gender stereotypical professions such as care work; the impact of having to choose between work and caring responsibilities on fertility rates, the loss of investment in education and training when women leave to take on unpaid caring roles, and the implications of women leaving the workforce and pension contributions.
45. She mentioned that on International Women's Day 2023 António Guterres, Secretary General of the UN, said that "Gender equality is growing more distant. On the current track, UN Women puts it 300 years away".
46. Former President H.E. Marie Louise Coleiro Preca spoke about the importance of International Women's Day and that it should be used to highlight injustices and discrimination against women.
47. Other panellists and participants spoke about how discrimination and harassment puts women off standing for election, lack of funding, importance of mentorships and creating a more supportive and inclusive environment. How to address the issues impacting on women across sectors and not look at them in silos/ independently was also raised, and the need to attract both young and older women into politics.
48. Finally, the participants discussed the impact of gender quotas, while allowing more women to become parliamentarians it has also led to the public not voting for women because 'they will be elected anyway'.
49. *"The Women in Conversation session was excellent. The EU Commissioner for Equalities observed that we have been discussing issues relating to women for over 50 years. Key issues that were raised by speakers were –*

violence against women, the lack of girls being able to access school was impacting on 129m girls across the world. Obstacles to delivering quality were highlighted: attitudes such as gender stereotypes, sexism and double standards. Practical issues that impacted on women are lack of family friendly work, lack of childcare. The need for monitoring by Parliaments to enable focused action by governments and the private sector was suggested. I think a statistic that stood out for me was the comment that it would take 300 years to achieve equality for women across the world, and 100 years in Europe.” - Sarah Boyack MSP

50. *“As Sarah outlined, the commentary from Commissioner Helena Dalli covered familiar themes such as the under-reporting on VAWG. I additionally noted that Malta has the lowest fertility rate in the EU – and I wonder how that will ultimately influence to the role of women across their society and in their legislature. Their recent moves to legislate for more women parliamentarians has not yet changed the culture within the parliament – something we continue to actively consider in our Scottish Parliament.” - Michelle Thomson MSP*



[Photos by Parliament of Malta]

IWD Session

51. The final session of the conference was a cross-regional webinar that allowed branches to discuss what issues are of most importance to young women in their country today.

Background

52. In November 2023 the Steering Committee of the [Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians \(CWP\) British Islands and Mediterranean Region \(BIMR\)](#) agreed to host an event to mark International Women’s Day as part of the CWP BIMR Conference. The objective of the event was “to bring together young women in groups across the BIM region to discuss the issues which are seen as the challenges faced by young women today; to collect these

responses and report as a region, creating a blueprint of issues facing young women; to consider replicating the process across the Commonwealth for the betterment of women and girls. Each country in the region that wishes to participate will host a session with young women in February 2024 before a plenary session on 8th March 2024 at which countries will report back, and an appointed rapporteur will create a summary report to send to the CWP Secretariat”.

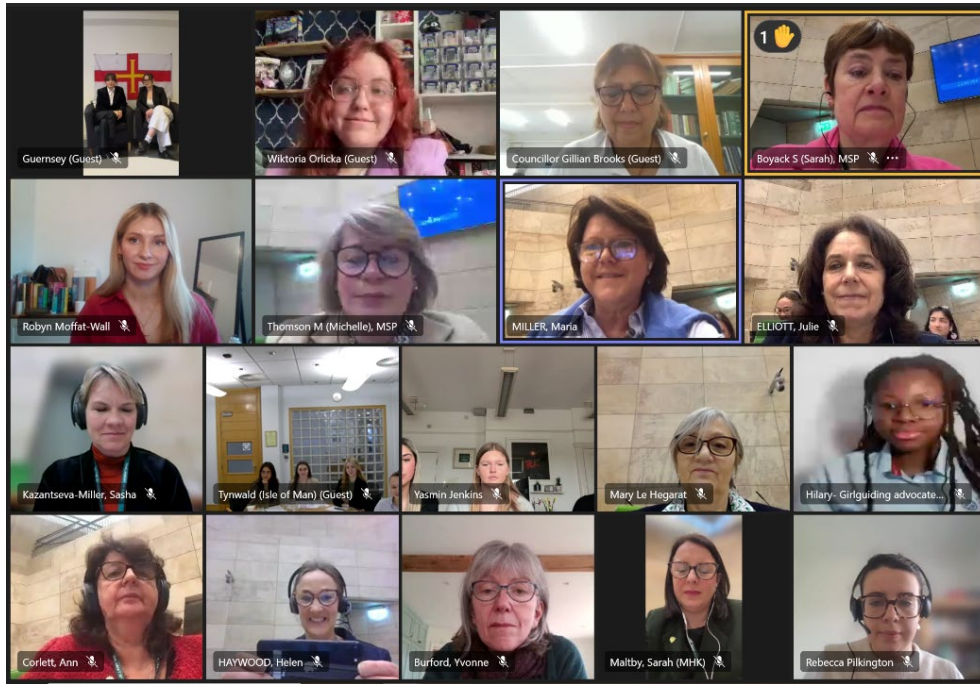
53. As a result, on 19 February Sarah Boyack MSP and Michelle Thomson MSP hosted a group session bringing together a group of young women to discuss the issues which are seen as the main challenges faced by young women in Scotland today.
54. The Scottish Parliament worked in collaboration with the Young Women’s Movement to shape the session and identify participants to take part. The participants ranged from 19-30 years old and came from different parts in Scotland both urban and rural.
55. The session ran for just under two hours, including both group discussions and breakout rooms, allowing to the participants to speak freely and openly about a wide range of issues. The conversation and topics were steered by the participants and initiated through two focus questions: “*What issues would you look at if you were First Minister?*” and “*What would an ideal Scotland look like in 2050?*”. A [report of the findings](#) was published following the session.

International Women’s Day session

56. Twelve young women from across six of the branches in the region took part in the session and fed back to the parliamentarians taking part in the conference what issues are of most importance to young women in their country today.
57. The main issues raised by the young women were violence against women and girls, misogyny in the justice system, period poverty, abortion rights, gender pay gap, lack of women in leadership roles, cost of living crisis, online safety and impact of media, sexualisation in schools, available financial and social assistance, toxicity of politics and how this makes it an unattractive profession for women, and health care and mental health.
58. “*Our young women Robyn and Wiktoria were excellent. They had prepared very effectively and communicated their key points very well.*”
59. *Robyn’s presentation addressed the need to tackle patriarchy, misogyny and deliver equal pay. She also highlighted the need to address the experiences of women in urban and rural areas, gender budgeting, the need for more action to make childcare available – young women should not have to choose between having a career and a family, the importance of redesigning the welfare system, eliminating misogyny from the justice system. She also made some excellent reflections on what more we need*

to do to deliver equality for women in politics: addressing the misogyny that pretends to be accountability, mentorship programmes and leadership development to encourage women to contribute to politics.

60. *Wiktoria focused on the need for an intersectional approach to ensure we link our discussions such as on gender, disability, racism, nationality, to address the accessibility of buildings and venues, access to literature and address language barriers. She highlighted the importance of addressing the issue of women and healthcare in terms of research and data and the need for doctors to understand women's health issues. She also flagged the need for safe spaces at night. Called on us to discuss issues like climate change and sport to include the perspective of women. Finally, she highlighted the importance of involving the Scottish Youth Parliament in these discussions and making sure that we include and think about involving women in the design of policies.*
61. *We also had good presentations from Jersey, UK, Isle of Man, St Helena and Guernsey. What struck me was that although there were some areas where the challenges were similar there were some specific differences in terms of different legislatures. For example period poverty came up several times – in Jersey period products are taxed, in the UK Period poverty was seen as an isolating experience, which led to 70% of girls worrying about the costs of period products. It was also referenced as a concern in the Isle of Man.*
62. *Lack of career opportunities for young women and lack of fair access to apprenticeships and STEM subjects was raised several times. Worryingly, pornography, sexual harassment, access to abortion were all cited as issues. Action to support women with disabilities was also recommended.”*
– Sarah Boyack MSP
63. **Sarah Boyack MSP intends to feedback to the Scottish Youth Parliament the issues that were raised.**
64. **She would also like to suggest that one of the young women writes an article for the CPA's Parliamentarian magazine to summarise the points they made.**
65. **Furthermore, she has written to the Chair of the CWP BIMR Steering Committee to ask if the feedback from the Young Women can be included in a session at the BIMR Conference in St Helena in May 2024.**
66. **Finally, she will include feedback from the young women at the CPA Scotland Branch AGM in September.**



Meeting with British High Commissioner

67. In the evening of 8 March Sarah Boyack MSP and Michelle Thomson MSP met with Katherine Ward LVO OBE, British High Commissioner to the Republic of Malta to discuss the political environment in Malta.

68. *"It was also good to meet the UK's High Commissioner for Malta. The ability to network and get a briefing was from my perspective very useful and to get her take on the current political situation in Malta. I think the points made by Michelle about the actions against journalistic freedom were really important too."*- Sarah Boyack MSP

69. Michelle Thomson MSP referenced this meeting in a letter to support petition PE1975 regarding SLAPPs. She has since then obtained agreement from the Scottish Government that they will now consult on SLAPPS with a view to legislating.



Feedback

70. *“As ever the opportunity to meet informally with other delegates was excellent and enabled discussions on the issues we were discussing in the conference and helped build relations between those attending especially those of us on the CPA CWP BIMR Steering Committee.”*- Sarah Boyack MSP
71. *“I regularly mentor women across the Scottish Parliament, regardless of political party. This also includes women supporting the parliament. Since my return from the conference I have been actively involved in supporting a younger woman – and I used the new insights I gained from the conference. All support I give is on a strictly confidential basis”.* – Michelle Thomson MSP
72. **Following the conference Sarah Boyack MSP spoke to the Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament about the Women’s’ caucus and celebrating 25 years of women MSPs.**

Conclusion

73. 6-9 March 2024 Sarah Boyack MSP, member of the Scotland BEC and CWP BIMR Steering Committee, and Michelle Thomson MSP, member of the CWP BIMR Steering Committee, attended the 10th BIMR CWP Conference took place in Valletta, Malta.
74. The theme of the conference was *Resilient Women - Moulding Girls into Strong Women* and the conference focused on how women are impacted by an array of circumstances, which calls for greater resilience. Sessions included *Issues and challenges affecting Women across the Commonwealth; Women under pressure: the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and cultural and societal inequality and discrimination;* and *Challenges of being a Woman Member of Parliament*. The conference also included an International CWP Strategy Discussion and *Women in Conversation*, which focused on sharing the female experience.
75. Furthermore, on International Women’s Day, 8 March, there was a session called *Time for International Women’s Day re-connections with local parliaments*, where parliaments across the region shared topics of interests highlighted by young women in their country. These were established through a group session taking place in each parliament. Two of the participants from the Scottish Parliament’s group session took part remotely in the session on 8 March.
76. Both Members spoke at the various sessions, in addition to presenting during the plenary sessions *Women under pressure: the impact of the cost-of-living crisis and cultural and societal inequality and discrimination* and *Challenges of being Woman Member of Parliament*.
77. The Members returned from the conference with various action points such as writing to the Scottish Government about SLAPPs and sharing feedback

from the young women during the International Women' Day session with other Members.

78. Furthermore, they were able to network and build on relationships with 40 other delegates from the legislatures of Cyprus, Gibraltar, Guernsey, Isle of Man, Jersey, Malta, Northern Ireland, Scotland, United Kingdom and Wales, allowing them to share ideas and exchange good practice.

International Relations Office
May 2024