

## **British Islands & Mediterranean Region Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Conference 12<sup>th</sup> – 14<sup>th</sup> February 2016 - Guernsey**

The conference was over two days and hosted approximately thirty five delegates and six international speakers.

The plenary sessions were:

- Gender Budgeting
- Women & Health & Social Care Policy
- Women in the Economy – Employment Policies
- Women in the Economy – Education Policies

A pre-conference questionnaire had been sent to regions and responses were circulated which enabled comparison between the various areas, but unfortunately a full comparison was not possible as not all regions had submitted their responses.

The speakers were all inspirational and it was useful to see how St Helena, despite its size was able to contribute to the various debates. It also served to highlight areas where there should be more focus and work still to be done like maternity pay, child benefits, carers allowances, breast screening and generally policies for the empowerment of women.

I attended the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Steering Committee (of which St Helena is currently a serving member) breakfast meeting on the second day. It was agreed that although the Hon. Christine Scipio-O’Dean was the named member it was acceptable for other women parliamentarians to represent St Helena given the logistics of distance and small number of women parliamentarians.

The conference afforded the opportunity to meet with like-minded people and allowed us to measure ourselves against each other and share possible solutions. I was impressed by the efforts and recognition afforded to such projects as the STEM (Science, Technology, Engineer and Manufacture) and the advances made to avoid cyberbullying, something that even St Helena needs to be vigilant about. There was also the “family” element – the sense that St Helena is part of a bigger family- people reminiscing about previous visits to the island and naming people they had either met on island or at previous conferences.

One of the strongest messages I bring back from the conference is that there is overwhelming support for St Helena and that most delegates and CPA members would love to be able to attend a conference on the island. I did however warn them that we would be unable to host such a conference even one the size of the one in Guernsey in the immediate future, even though we should have the airport opened soon. There were other constraints such as the expense and restricted availability of hotel accommodation.

In England I met the St Helena Representative Mrs Kedell Warboys for a briefing, unfortunately Parliament was in recess so I was unable to meet with any ministers, however she did arrange meetings for me with Mari McKinsby, the FCO desk officer and RSPB representative Jonathan Hall, who had recently returned from Ascension Island.

On Ascension I had meetings with both the Administrator and the Ascension Island Council. I also held a public meeting to discuss the 10 Year Plan, to coincide with meetings being held on St Helena -this was poorly attended, five people only but I met privately with four other people. The theme from the meetings was still the underlying concerns of what will happen

when the RMS comes off line and the airport is up and running, although they were largely reassured that there were systems in place to continue the links between the islands both by sea and air. I was unable to furnish them with additional information they required eg fares, other than what was already in the public arena. Additionally there were expressed concerns regarding the state of the roads St Helena in general and one private road in particular, which I am still awaiting further information on.

Finally on board the RMS there were a couple of returning Saint Helenians who were thinking of settling and wanted to discuss changes like availability and variety of accommodation, jobs, health care arrangements and what sort of set up problems for new businesses. I was able to give a general overview but more importantly I was able to provide contact details for further information.

I would deem this a successful trip both in terms of the conference and the meetings held afterwards, which provided successful opportunities for information sharing and networking.

Pamela Ward Pearce  
14<sup>th</sup> April 2016.