

COSLA's strategic context and priorities for the new COSLA Plan (2022 – 2027)

Summary and Recommendations

In February 2022, Convention reviewed COSLA's current strategic context and agreed that a refreshed COSLA Plan should be based on the 'Blueprint for Local Government' and that the detail be brought to Convention in October 2022 for approval. This report provides COSLA's new Convention with an updated summary of the current strategic context for Local Government and an overview of the types of issues that should be included under each of the six Blueprint themes.

This paper invites Convention to:

- i. provide comments on the strategic context and key priorities for COSLA; and
- ii. agree that a refreshed COSLA Plan be brought to Convention for agreement in October 2022 using the Blueprint themes as its basis.

References

Previous reports to Convention:

- 22-02-25 Item 6 - COSLA's strategic context and priorities post-election
- 21-03-26 Item 3 - Local Government Blueprint
- 17-06-30 Item 9 - COSLA Plan 2017/18 – 2021/22

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Purpose

1. To report provide Convention with a summary of the current strategic context and ask that Convention members provide their views on priorities for COSLA for the new Local Government term. This will allow officers to work with new COSLA Office bearers and Local Government stakeholders, with the aim of bringing a draft COSLA Plan back to Convention in October 2022 for approval.

COSLA’s current priorities

2. In 2017, Convention approved The COSLA Plan 2017-22 with a clear vision “ . . . *to make communities better and more equal places by empowering local decision making and enabling councils to do what works locally.*” At that time, 8 priorities were agreed and 2 were subsequently added. The plan also contained a set of principles and values that underpin all our work; irrespective of those priorities and policies:

COSLA priorities 2017-22	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • LOCAL GOVERNMENT FUNDING • UK EXIT FROM THE EUROPEAN UNION • DEMOCRACY AND REFORM • EDUCATION and CHILDREN’S SERVICES • HEALTH and SOCIAL CARE • LOCAL ECONOMIES and INCLUSIVE GROWTH 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A UNITED VOICE FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT • EFFECTIVE SHARED SERVICES • EQUALITY, REPRESENTATION & DIVERSITY • STRONG, SAFE AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES
Principles	Values
Strengthening Local Democracy Working Together Locally Delivering Outcomes Focusing Communities Defending Local Choices	Ambitious Accountable Positive Focused Proactive

3. The COVID pandemic required a reshaping and repositioning of Local Government. With COSLA Office bearers and key stakeholders, COSLA set about creating a strong positive vision for Local Government and defined a “blueprint” for the future. In August 2020, COSLA Leaders endorsed the [‘Blueprint for Local Government’](#) and a communication strategy, and Convention was asked to agree a set of actions in March 2021.
4. Since then, the Blueprint has continued to be promoted at every opportunity – with new Ministers and MSPs, as part of Budget lobbying, and in generally promoting the importance of the work of Councils across Scotland. The Blueprint has also been the catalyst for a series of successful campaigns to proactively promote Local Government, including “*Scotland’s Councils: essential every day*” and “*This is Local Government*”.

Looking Forward – COSLA’s strategic context and priorities for post-election

Programme for Government and National Care Service

5. In September 2021, Scottish Government published its [Programme for Government](#) (PfG) setting out its intentions for the Parliamentary term, including its legislative programme. (This followed on from the “First 100 Days” commitments, which saw a number of operational actions that required Local Government delivery including commitments around removal of fees for music tuition and curricular charges, and funding for playparks).
6. Significantly for Local Government, commitments within the PfG included establishment of a National Care Service, expansion of free school meals, Early Learning and Childcare, and wraparound care for school age children, delivery of *The Promise*, just transition and fair work, green transport/active travel, economic transformation (including community wealth building), affordable housing, 20-minute neighbourhoods and place-based investment.
7. Most notable among the PfG commitments is the intention to create a National Care Service (NCS). Following on from the [Independent Review of Adult Social Care](#) (IRASC) the Scottish Government consulted on the proposals within the review. COSLA [responded to the consultation](#) and expressed significant concerns that the consultation set out a potential scope of an NCS which went far beyond the IRASC and included the potential for children and justice services to be included in the NCS.
8. Following IRASC COSLA agreed a [Statement of Intent](#) with the Scottish Government which would take forward a range of issues to improve adult social care ahead of any NCS given that this could be 5 years in the future. Since then, officers have worked to progress the Statement of Intent.
9. Legislation is set to be laid in parliament before the end of this session and work has also been carried out on a ‘Target Operating Model’ for the NCS. There remains a great deal of uncertainty about the scope and operation of the NCS at this point, but it is clear that there are significant risks to local authorities’ role as commissioners of social care services. COSLA officers are working closely with Local Government colleagues and wider stakeholders to influence NCS developments

Covid-19 Recovery Strategy

10. In October 2021, COSLA signed up to a [COVID Recovery Strategy](#) with Scottish Government, which contained a commitment to build on the partnership working with Local Government which underpinned the Covid response to shape the recovery activity. The strategy’s vision is

By working together, we will:

- Address the systemic inequalities made worse by Covid
- Make progress towards a wellbeing economy
- Accelerate inclusive person-centred public services

11. Joint governance arrangements have now been put in place and COSLA is securing funding for 2 posts to co-ordinate and develop work across Local Government.

National Strategy for Economic Transformation

12. On 1st March the Scottish Government published its [National Strategy for Economic Transformation \(NSET\)](#), a 10-year strategy covering 6 broad themes aimed at transforming the Scottish economy - Entrepreneurial People and Culture; New Market opportunities; Productive Businesses and Regions; Skilled Workforce; Fairer and more equal society; A New Culture of Delivery. Local Government has had limited collective involvement in the creation of the Strategy and minimal opportunity to collectively influence

any emerging drafts and governance arrangements. Despite this, Local Government is seen as a key delivery partner and is expected to contribute to the delivery of many of the actions in the Strategy beyond our existing support for the Business Support Partnership which the Government recognises has the potential to deliver on specific actions.

13. A new NSET 'Delivery Board' does not feature representation from Local Government nor from the agencies and yet is expected to hold democratically elected councils, among others, to account – this is a key area that is being picked up with Scottish Government.

Resource Spending Review

14. On 31 May, Scottish Government published its **Resource Spending Review (RSR)** – [Investing in Scotland's Future](#) – outlining its spending plans for the rest of the parliamentary term, as well as plans for public service reform and efficiency. Given current constraints (UK funding, official forecasts including based on current tax policy, and demand pressures), the RSR has sought to focus spending plans on addressing three outward facing priorities – child poverty; climate change; economic transformation – as well as a priority around high quality public services. The RSR highlighted a 'new deal' for Local Government, through the development of a Partnership Agreement and Fiscal Framework (discussed below).
15. Most significantly, the RSR shows a "flat-lining" of revenue (resource) funding for Local Government at 22/23 levels for the next 3 financial years (this includes a baselining of the £120m added during the Budget Bill) and then sees an additional £100m added in 26/27. At their meeting on 17 June, Leaders will be asked to consider the wider implications of the RSR, as well as a communications strategy. Clearly, this RSR is key part of COSLA's strategic context and will significantly limit Local Government's ability to address recovery, economic transformation, child poverty and climate change.

Cost of Living Crisis

16. Since both the RSR and the COVID Recovery Strategy were published, the '**cost of living crisis**' has emerged as a key threat. Soaring inflation and energy costs are impacting individuals, families, organisations (including councils) and businesses. Scottish Government is designing interventions that will undoubtedly involve delivery at a local level by Local Government. It is likely that this crisis will influence services across the public sector for some time to come, including being asked to deliver support and to deal with the impacts on health and wellbeing.

Climate Change

17. Local Government in Scotland supports an ambitious approach to tackling **climate change and the national net zero emissions** target set for 2045. Local authorities are working extensively on all aspects of decarbonisation and climate resilience, with many councils committed to go beyond national targets and deliver carbon neutrality by 2030. COSLA therefore strongly supports the UN Paris Climate Agreement and its aims, welcoming COP26 agreement in line with keeping global temperatures as close as possible to the 1.5 degrees centigrade target. This will be central to COSLA's work on behalf of Local Government going forward. However, the outcome of the RSR will mean that targets will be extremely challenging, given the "flat-cash" revenue settlements anticipated for the next 3 years (and a similar scenario presented in the Capital Spending Review that was published last year).

Local Government Fiscal Framework

18. During 2021, Leaders agreed a refreshed scope for a **Local Government Fiscal Framework**, aimed at provided more stability, certainty, and transparency in relation to Local Government funding, as well as local discretion around taxation, fees, charges, discounts, and exemptions. Work is progressing with Scottish Government at an officer level but politically and at a more strategic level, relations have been tested for a few

reasons – frequent policy announcements that impact Local Government with no prior discussions; disregard for Local Government voice in discussions; lack to respect for local democratic mandate and the key role of Councillors; subsequent poor one-year settlements that see real term cuts to core budgets. Meetings with the First Minister and Cabinet Secretaries have discussed these issues and through the jointly agreed **Local Government Engagement Plan** we are working to resolve issues for the benefit our communities, including the development of a **Partnership Statement** during 2022.

European Charter for Local Self-Government

19. The incorporation of the **European Charter for Local Self-Government** into Scots law has been delayed by the well-publicised challenge in the Supreme Court. However, despite being a very slow process, this remains a strategic priority for COSLA, and the expectation remains that the Bill will be reintroduced to the Scottish Parliament and that it continues to have cross-party support. Once passed, this will give legal effect in domestic law to the Charter's range of powers and protections for Local Government.

Levelling Up

20. The UK Government is now working directly with councils across the UK to delivery on its "**Levelling up**" agenda, as well as developing the detail of the new Shared Prosperity Fund. These signal a new more direct relationship between UK and Scottish Local Government, providing opportunities and threats for the future.
21. This is a complex and cluttered strategic context, and there is overlap between many of the key strategies and plans – wellbeing, the economy, child poverty, children and young people, net zero etc. The "how" Local Government responds will undoubtedly present challenges over the next Local Government term; so it is essential that COSLA has a clear set of priorities to guide its work and deliver the maximum benefit for all Councils and communities across Scotland.

Proposed COSLA Position

22. The 'Blueprint for Local Government' gives COSLA a strong basis on which to shape our work for the next 5 year, across its 6 themes:
- **Strengthening Local Democracy**
An empowered Local Government will represent the diverse voices of communities and include them in the decision-making for Scotland's recovery and renewal.
 - **Funding Services and Communities**
A fairly funded Local Government will build resilient and sustainable communities in the recovery from COVID-19. Fair funding can also ensure that the value of our workforce can be recognised and that services can be planned for the medium term, ultimately leading to better outcomes for individuals and communities. The reality of the RSR must influence our new corporate plan.
 - **Wellbeing – including Health and Social Care**
Local Government will work to re-build services that support wellbeing and that are sustainable for the future and focused on outcomes. However, the context of the National Care Service will influence what this looks like over the next few years.
 - **Education and Children and Young People**
Local Government will work to identify the opportunities to ensure our children and young people get the very best education, wider learning and support that can be offered, with a clear focus on tackling poverty and social inequality. This will also be set against Scottish Government's Education Reform agenda.
 - **Economy and the Environment**

Local Government will lead a response that is tailored to the needs of different people and places, and which reach across all communities. Councils' role in the just transition to net zero is critical and must be a key feature on a new corporate plan.

- **Supporting Vulnerable Communities**

Local Government will take a lead role in supporting a fair and inclusive recovery with a strong focus on supporting the realisation of human rights, tackling poverty, and addressing intersectional inequalities. A clear focus on the 'cost of living crisis' is now required.

23. By developing and refreshing the narrative and actions that sit beneath each of these themes to fully take account of the current and emerging strategic context, as well as building on achievements from the last 5 years, COSLA can ensure it is well placed to deliver for its member councils. It will also be important that the plan reflects the ongoing joint work with Scottish Government on recovery. This 'refresh' would essentially become the COSLA Plan for 2022 – 2027.

24. COSLA's principles are stated clearly within the Constitution and will guide the new plan. The values, as presented in the table at para 2, will be reviewed to ensure their appropriateness in the current strategic operating context, and the rationale for any required changes would be clearly explained to Convention.

Next Steps

25. If this approach is agreed by Convention, officers will engage with COSLA's new Office Bearers and Local Government stakeholders to fully develop the new COSLA plan, bringing it to Convention for approval in October 2022.