

Scottish Local Government International Framework

Summary and Recommendations

This paper provides a Framework for Scottish Local Government international engagement, resulting from an extensive scoping exercise carried out by COSLA with the input of councils as mandated previously by Convention.

The primary aim was to scope the wide range of opportunities and examine the added value and practicality of existing or additional engagements for local authorities, both on an individual and collective basis.

The proposed International Framework provides a vision on the potential, and limits, particularly as perceived by councils, of our international engagement moving forward in a post-EU membership context, while aligning ourselves with existing practice in comparable developed countries in Europe and worldwide. If agreed this could be then developed further in detail into a Scottish Local Government International Engagement Strategy 2030, co-produced by COSLA and the 32 councils.

Convention is invited to:

- i. Welcome the findings of the international scoping exercise carried out by COSLA and councils as mandated by Convention; and
- i. Agree, with any changes, the proposed International Framework.

References

Most recent relevant reports:

- Convention October 2020 - Scottish Local Government - Future International Engagement
- Convention March 2019 - UK Exit From the EU Update

Dr Serafin Pazos-Vidal
Head of Brussels Office
COSLA
serafin@cosla.gov.uk

Judith Macgregor
EU Policy Officer

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Scottish Local Government International Engagement Framework

Purpose

1. This paper provides a framework for Scottish Local Government international engagement, resulting from the extensive international engagement scoping exercise carried out by COSLA with the input of councils as mandated by Convention.

Current COSLA Position

2. Convention of 30 March 2019 agreed to launch a scoping exercise to map out existing and potentially available opportunities for international engagement for Scottish Local Government. The primary aim was to scope the wide range of opportunities and examine the added value and practicality of existing or additional engagements for local authorities, both on an individual and collective basis.
3. A detailed consultation document¹ highlighting available possibilities for international engagement was produced. Several rounds of input from councils have taken place since. Views from our UK and international partners have been also sought. This Framework is also informed from the discussions and joint activities with the UK and Scottish Governments during COP26, providing a real-life test of the potential and limits for international local government engagement.
4. The proposed International Framework provides a vision on the potential, and limits, particularly as perceived by councils, of our international engagement moving forward in a post-EU membership context and aligning ourselves with existing practice in comparable developed countries in Europe and worldwide.
5. Though the Convention considered that the initial scoping could be progressed into an International Strategy and operational plan, we believe it more appropriate to seek Convention agreement first on an International Framework setting out the broader terms and rationale, its potential and limits to engagement.
6. If this Framework is agreed, this would be then developed in detail into a Scottish Local Government International Engagement Strategy 2030, co-produced by COSLA and the 32 councils.

What is Changing?

7. All local authorities have some international links, being known members of 26 international organisations or networks and 11 international campaigns. This is a conservative estimate, as it does not count the many town twinning arrangements with Europe and worldwide.
8. At least 60 Scottish councillors have had an international mandate during the present term. In COSLA's case, two of COSLA's spokespersons have the same role in the Council of European Municipality and Regions (CEMR), where COSLA also sends representatives to its Policy Committee. As a result of CEMR membership, COSLA is also part of the worldwide municipal body United Cities and Local Government (UCLG) where the President sits at the World Council. Through UCLG, COSLA members have attended the

¹ COSLA. "A World of Opportunities. Scottish Local Government International Scoping Document", June 2019.

UN High Level Forum on Sustainable Development and more recently the President represented Europe in the UN summit on the UN Convention on the Rights of the Persons with Disabilities. Participation in CEMR/UCLG also makes participation possible in the Organisation on Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) whose work influences domestic policies.

9. COSLA nominated and supported four members in the EU Committee of the Regions (CoR) for 25 years until February 2020. The recently established UK-CoR Contact Group – which is attended by the President or the Spokespersons - has provided a forum for political and regulatory dialogue with our EU counterparts and is a useful channel to address local impacts of the ongoing UK-EU negotiations. This is particularly relevant as the Scottish Continuity Act 2022 foresees that whenever Scottish Ministers keep pace with EU targets, Local Government must be consulted. The COSLA leadership met in December with the CoR draftsman currently scoping the future of this contact group and improving links between UK and EU municipalities.
10. The status of the two Scottish members nominated and supported by COSLA at the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe is unaffected by EU exit. A delegation reporting on the application of the European Charter for Local Self Government across the UK met the COSLA leadership in July and the report will now be tabled in the March Plenary session of the Congress for a debate with a UK Minister.
11. Similarly, COSLA has expanded its engagement with the wider UK Stakeholders Group Brussels (UKSG), a group set up by all UK organisations having a Brussels Office, in cooperation with the UK Mission to the EU and the devolved administrations' offices. It has proven an excellent source of expertise and engagement in the details of the new UK-EU relationship. COSLA leads the sustainability group.
12. COP26 was an excellent test and lessons have been learned: Glasgow City Council welcomed a large set of international delegations despite all the security and public health constraints. For its part, COSLA, with Glasgow, the UK and the Scottish Governments' support and the collaboration of many councils, was able to organise a number of events with our UK and international peers geared towards strengthening the role of Local Government in the summit's Glasgow Agreement.
13. Having said all this, the scoping exercise suggests that there is limited awareness of international engagement and opportunity within councils, and particularly of what other councils might be doing. To a certain extent COSLA's international engagement is better understood, but only by those having some international exposure themselves. While this relative unawareness reflects a given council or organisation's focus on their own respective priorities, this can lead to engagement opportunities being missed or Scottish slots in major events being left vacant.
14. International trade, including trade missions for inward investment was not a particular feature of the consultation exercise but there is a significant amount of reported activity, especially among the larger urban councils, in most part via Scottish Government agencies. International culture, arts, science, including festivals and international conferences, are also areas of increasing focus of city councils.
15. Despite EU exit uncertainty being a factor slowing down this exercise, it was felt by councils that EU exit is not in itself a factor that will deter building or maintaining existing partnerships and links. Overall, and despite UK withdrawal, international partners continue to welcome the knowledge that can be provided by UK councils in general.
16. While the larger councils have traditionally had international strategies of their own, others are taking the opportunity to develop one, and the evidence and support that COSLA

provides has been welcomed, to help councils navigate the available options. Councils generally remain cautious about the possibility of engaging further than at present.

17. A key issue is finance as councils are unlikely to be able to allocate resources to international engagement in a proportion anywhere similar to what is common in other developed countries or, some time ago, in England. Seeking a global grant from the Scottish or UK Government to support Local Government international engagement - just as it is the case in France and many other countries - was not specifically requested by a majority of respondents to the scoping exercise.
18. That said, the UK Government has been subsidising Local Government international engagement outside the EU, and most recently, despite not seeking to opt into the EU INTERREG programme (for which COSLA actively lobbied), it has started financing some pilots for town twinning with France. Working with COSLA and our counterparts, the UK and French Governments are sponsoring a UK-France Local Government forum to be held later in 2022, and financially covering the participation of Local Government leaders from across the UK, which should constitute a good pilot for future activities elsewhere.
19. The Scottish Government is also proposing to work with COSLA in developing town twinning links but so far only geared on trade matters, while its offices in various countries work closely with COSLA on twinning. That said, despite COSLA's decades old support for councils forging and renewing their own partnerships, there is a risk that this more recent interest from the Scottish and UK Governments, overshadows and creates unnecessary duplication with Local Government's own work on this issue.
20. Last but not least, there is merit in fostering our relationships with our peers. Very often these links are time consuming but cost neutral. For instance, the input from various COSLA international peers fed into the Local Governance Review, and our work on the European Charter for Local Self Government Bill. Our Swedish and Norwegian peers have identified the two Mayors speaking at COSLA Conference.

Proposed COSLA position

21. On the basis of the above summary of the scoping exercise, what follows is the proposed Scottish Local Government International Framework.

Vision

22. "Scottish Local Government as an engaged international actor".

Desired outcome

23. "To narrow the gap between Scotland and Scottish councils' international ambition and practical ability to engage internationally."

Rationale for Engagement

24. The engagement criteria need to be grounded on added value, benefit and resources.

25. A value added assessment of a proposed international engagement should consider:

- the proposed activity's contribution in furthering Scottish councils' role as good global citizens, and supporting Scottish and UK international presence, and
- the specific benefit for the Council itself and for its communities that a proposed activity can provide.

26. While these two dimensions of added value are not necessarily contradictory, prioritising one over the other is a political judgement call for Local Government's political leadership. Without such political and corporate ownership, it is unlikely that any proposed international activity can move forward.

Collaboration within the wider Scottish Local Government sector

27. There is appetite for better awareness of opportunities for cooperation and COSLA has a continuing role in providing that information.
28. While there is a preference in continuing to participate in existing structures over sharing and pooling of resources, there is scope for further cooperation between local authorities in the following terms:
- with defined common objectives,
 - focused on more strategic networks and themes, and
 - with a specific outcome or benefit from developing joint awareness.
29. Within these parameters (no new structures, build on existing arrangements, demonstrable added value), there is scope for Local Government governance and partnership arrangements that strengthen feedback and development collectively at international level, and a network of communication for international engagement.

Awareness of Existing Opportunities

30. There still appear to be opportunities and campaigns open to Scottish Local Government participation, and COSLA will seek better to advertise those to councils.
31. There is a preference in maintaining links and partnerships with EU peers and networks and further engaging with international bodies, namely the United Nations on Sustainable Development Goals and OECD on local economic development.
32. There is scope for engaging internationally on best practice exchanges on innovative public policies and international culture, arts, and science including attracting investment for festivals and international conferences.
33. Some of that activity such as contributing to international studies and surveys, is cost neutral but can significantly contribute to Scotland's international reputation.
34. While it is up for individual councils to scope their future engagement, there is great potential in these opportunities, and various others not tied to the EU that have so far remained unexplored by Scottish Local Government.

Barriers to Engagement

35. Most councils feel that there is no financial room left for councils to foster and build on international relations and benefits in this area can take a long time to materialise.
36. Finance, capacity and timescales are common barriers for councils' international engagement. Successful engagement will depend on:
- Sound business cases and evidenced outcomes;
 - Dedicated expertise, staff time and ownership from senior levels; and
 - Time, as international partnerships require nurturing over years.
37. Engaging in international activities must be wary of being depicted as frivolous, elitist or unnecessary. Hence ensuring full ownership at a corporate level is necessary.

National Funding for Council International Engagement

38. Councils' available resources for international engagement are, and are likely to continue to be, small, particularly compared with most of our equivalent international peers.
39. The Scottish Government and the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office do presently finance international engagement of local authorities and others. However, this is ad hoc

and often inconsistent, usually on particular projects helping Local Government in developing countries to improve standards or services, inward investment or twinning.

40. It seems logical that where Local Government has the legal power, expertise and international links, that either Government supports Local Government in expanding the UK and Scotland international footprint rather than duplicating what is already done.
41. The power for Local Government to engage internationally is enshrined by law through the Local Government (Overseas Assistance) Act 1993. The same Act was, until 2010, the basis for a statutory block grant to support the international engagement for councils in Northern Ireland, Wales and England. Thus, as both the Scottish and UK Governments develop their post EU international policies, it is appropriate that Local Government's role, including finance, is factored in whenever it can provide more added value and better outcomes.

Conclusion and next steps

42. The present International Framework aims to provide a shared understanding, based on previous extensive discussions with councils, on why and particularly how Scottish Local Government can ideally work together internationally in a way that best serves public interest and achieves better outcomes.
43. However, the specific actions moving forward must be co-produced in detail by councils and COSLA. This will take the form of a Scottish Local Government International Strategy 2030 to be developed at the start of the 2022-2027 Local Government term. The proposed timescale of 2030 is due to a number of key international goals that the UK and Scottish Governments are required to report on then, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

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