

MINUTE OF COSLA LEADERS MEETING (DRAFT)

Friday 26 February 2021, 11.00am
Via Microsoft Teams

Present

COSLA President	Councillor Alison Evison
COSLA Vice President	Councillor Graham Houston
Aberdeen City Council	Angela Scott
Aberdeen City Council	Councillor Douglas Lumsden
Aberdeenshire Council	Jim Savege
Aberdeenshire Council	Councillor Andy Kille
Angus Council	Margo Williamson
Angus Council	Councillor David Fairweather
Argyll and Bute Council	Pippa Milne
Argyll and Bute Council	Councillor Robin Currie
City of Edinburgh Council	Andrew Kerr
City of Edinburgh Council	Councillor Claire Miller
City of Edinburgh Council	Councillor Adam McVey
Clackmannanshire Council	Nikki Bridle
Clackmannanshire Council	Councillor Ellen Forson
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	Malcolm Burr
Comhairle nan Eilean Siar	Councillor Roddie Mackay
Dumfries and Galloway Council	Gavin Stevenson
Dumfries and Galloway Council	Councillor Rob Davidson
Dumfries and Galloway Council	Councillor Gail Macgregor
COSLA Spokesperson	
Dundee City Council	Gregory Colgan
Dundee City Council	Councillor John Alexander
East Ayrshire Council	Eddie Fraser
East Ayrshire Council	Councillor Douglas Reid
East Dunbartonshire Council	Gerry Cornes
East Dunbartonshire Council	Councillor Vaughan Moody
East Dunbartonshire Council	Councillor Andrew Polson
East Lothian Council	Monica Patterson
East Lothian Council	
COSLA Spokesperson	Councillor Stuart Currie
East Lothian Council	Councillor Norman Hampshire (Substitute)
East Renfrewshire Council	Lorraine McMillan
East Renfrewshire Council	Councillor Tony Buchanan
Falkirk Council	Kenneth Lawrie
Falkirk Council	Councillor Cecil Meiklejohn

Fife Council
Fife Council
Fife Council
Glasgow City Council
Glasgow City Council
Highland Council
Highland Council
Inverclyde Council
Inverclyde Council
COSLA Spokesperson
Midlothian Council
Midlothian Council
Midlothian Council
COSLA Spokesperson
Moray Council
Moray Council
North Ayrshire Council
North Ayrshire Council
North Lanarkshire Council
North Lanarkshire Council
Orkney Islands Council
Orkney Islands Council
COSLA Spokesperson
Orkney Islands Council
Perth and Kinross Council
Perth and Kinross Council
Perth and Kinross Council
Renfrewshire Council
Renfrewshire Council
Scottish Borders Council
Scottish Borders Council
Shetland Islands Council
South Ayrshire Council
South Ayrshire Council
South Lanarkshire Council
South Lanarkshire Council
Stirling Council
Stirling Council
West Dunbartonshire Council
West Dunbartonshire Council
West Lothian Council
West Lothian Council

Steve Grimmond
Councillor David Alexander
Councillor David Ross
Annemarie O'Donnell
Councillor Susan Aitken
Donna Manson
Councillor Margaret Davidson
Aubrey Fawcett

Councillor Stephen McCabe
Dr Grace Vickers
Councillor Derek Milligan

Councillor Kelly Parry
Roderick Burns
Councillor Graham Leadbitter
Craig Hatton
Councillor Joe Cullinane
Des Murray
Councillor Paul Kelly (Substitute)
Gavin Barr (Substitute)

Councillor Steven Heddle
Councillor James Stockan
Barbara Renton
Councillor Peter Barrett
Councillor Murray Lyle
Sandra Black
Councillor Iain Nicolson
David Robertson (Substitute)
Councillor Sandy Scott (Substitute)
Councillor Steven Coutts
Eileen Howat
Councillor Peter Henderson
Cleland Sneddon
Councillor John Ross
Carol Beattie
Councillor Scott Farmer
Joyce White
Councillor Jonathan McColl
Graham Hope
Councillor Lawrence Fitzpatrick

Apologies

East Lothian Council
North Lanarkshire Council
Orkney Islands Council
Scottish Borders Council
Scottish Borders Council

Councillor William Innes*
Councillor Jim Logue*
John Mundell*
Councillor Shona Haslam
Tracey Logan*

* *denotes substitute provided*

Public Session

1. Introduction

Cllr Alison Evison welcomed Leaders to this meeting and disseminated advice on how the meeting would be conducted virtually, and how to report any technical issues. Apologies and substitutes were noted separately for the minute.

Prior to moving on to formal business, Cllr Evison drew Leaders' attention to the Local Government Benchmarking Framework report. It was noted that this report discussed figures prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and showed councils' dedication to maintaining delivery of essential services. Post-COVID it was likely that Local Government would have more challenges to tackle.

2. Draft Minutes of Leaders' Meetings

- 29 January 2021 (paper **LD/21/29**)
- 10 February 2021 (paper **LD/21/30**)

Agreement of these minutes was continued to the next Leaders Meeting due to their late circulation.

3. Green Growth Accelerator (paper LD/21/31)

This paper sought approval from Leaders on the application process and assessment criteria for potential projects under a pathfinder initiative. This was previously brought before Leaders in November at which point it was noted that more work was required with partners to agree a timeline. COSLA officers were now discussing Scottish Government revenue funding for potential applicants and were working with Scottish Futures Trust to iron out any issues before they arose.

Leaders:

- i. Agreed their support for the Green Growth Accelerator pilot application process;
- ii. Noted that discussions with Scottish Government on how the risk to councils could be mitigated would continue;
- iii. Agreed that issues emerging in the process be referred to the Environment and Economy Board; and
- iv. Noted that Leaders would be updated as required.

4. Place Based Investment Fund (paper LD/21/32)

This paper sought Leaders' agreement that COSLA support this Fund. The proposal was that £23 million would be allocated to local authorities, per annum, for five years. The money would be allocated to assist with place-based working, regeneration, town centre revitalisation and other related issues. Subject to agreement, a distribution mechanism for the Fund would be considered for the fund through the normal processes.

Leaders:

- i. Noted the establishment of the Place Based Investment Programme; and
- ii. Agreed the policy intent to distribute the proposed portion of the Place Based Investment Programme to local authorities.

5. Councillors' Code of Conduct (paper LD/21/33)

The paper provided an update on work which had been carried out to revise the Councillors' Code of Conduct. Work on drafting had been carried out through a Scottish Government-led working group and included professional representation from SOLACE, SOLAR, the Standards Commission and COSLA, whose input was influenced by the Barriers to Elected Office Special Interest Group.

Key areas for revision of the Code of Conduct included definitions of bullying, declarations of interest and removal of the requirement to publish councillors' home addresses. The draft response was appended to the report and Leaders were invited to discuss any arising issues.

In discussion, it was agreed that a report would be presented to a future Leaders Meeting as regards the Standards Commission and, in particular, the role of the Ethical Standards Commissioner.

Leaders:

- i. Provided comments on the interim COSLA officer response to the Scottish Government public consultation on the draft revised Code of Conduct; and
- ii. Agreed the official COSLA consultation response for submission to Scottish Government.

Private Session

6. Local Government Finance Update (paper LD/21/34)

Prior to the introduction of the report, Leaders were provided with an update following the UK Government announcement of a UK-wide Levelling-Up Fund. Since the announcement, officers had spoken with their UK Government counterparts and confirmed that of the £4.8 billion over four years, at least £800 million would be available to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Further detail would soon be made available on the UK-wide Community Renewal Fund for 2021/22 and then Shared Prosperity Fund for 2022 onwards, forming a package of funding streams to which Scottish Local Government would have direct access.

COSLA spokespeople would meet again with the relevant UK Ministers to discuss the detail of the fund and how Scottish Local Government might benefit, following which a report would be submitted to the next Leaders Meeting for a formal position to be taken.

The paper itself provided an update on work undertaken to advance points which were agreed at the previous meeting. COSLA officers yesterday had received a response from the Cabinet Secretary on the formal request after the last Leaders Meeting in relation to service concession and flexibility, and a technical briefing had also been received and disseminated explaining the implications for Leaders.

An amendment to the recommendations was proposed:

Amendment – proposed by Cllr David Ross, seconded by Cllr Douglas Reid.

Add:

- iv. Further to this, Leaders:
 - restate their view that councils should have the right to determine the level of council tax for their authorities without facing penalties, but in the light of the

current offer of £90m for authorities that agree to freeze the council tax for 2021/22, COSLA should continue to press with urgency for this amount to be baselined for future years, and Leaders agree that the COSLA President write to the First Minister seeking an urgent assurance that the Council Tax incentive funding is base-lined into the Local Government Settlement;

- note that the letter from the Cabinet Secretary to Cllr Macgregor dated 25th February, regarding flexibility on service concessions, fails to resolve COSLA's concerns and agree to continue to press for a satisfactory resolution on this issue; and in particular:
 - rejects the recently added elements of the flexibility contained in the recent letter to Cllr MacGregor and call on the Scottish Government to allow local government to adopt the annuity method under the terms described and provided to Scottish Government Officials by Directors of Finance. It is unfortunate that the ongoing discussions between COSLA and Scottish Government Officials have failed to produce a suitable and practical solution to the pressures experienced by local government due to Covid-19. In the most recent letter to Cllr MacGregor we see more conditions added, the removal of the potential for the flexibility to provide ongoing support as well as the requirement to move to a depreciation model, all of which is to the detriment of local government. The ask of local government was for practical financial support involving simple changes to the calculation of debt repayment and instead we now have a flexibility that is not what was originally offered; and notes
 - We are expressly concerned that the removal of statutory mitigation has come without notice and we are concerned that it has now become aligned to the flexibilities. The proposal to remove the mitigations over 10 years does nothing to safeguard councils and as such we wholly reject the proposal to remove statutory mitigation given the harm it will do to local government finances and local communities. The contents of the letter to Cllr MacGregor are concerning especially the proposal to remove statutory mitigation and for local government to bring forward proposals on how this could be achieved within 18 months. This new condition is wholly unacceptable and cannot be allowed to stand given the instability and uncertainty that would arise in local government should statutory mitigation be removed. Statutory Mitigation is used to stabilise specific costs from impacting on local Council Tax levels and should Statutory Mitigation be removed then there will be risks that the current stability in local government finances will be gone.
- note that the proposed levels of capital funding for the next 5 years will severely restrict the ability of councils to invest to assist with the necessary recovery from the Covid19 pandemic, and agree to continue representations for a greatly increased capital allocation.

Following discussion, this amendment was supported unanimously by Leaders.

Accordingly, Leaders:

- i. Noted the work undertaken to progress Leaders' mandate in relation to council tax, pay, loss of income in 20-21, capital and certainty around the Local Government settlement;
- ii. Noted the position in relation to Living Wage discussions with Scottish Government;
- iii. Agreed that Cllr Macgregor, in conjunction with SOLACE and Directors of Finance, write to the Local Government and Communities Committee to outline the current

and impending situation in relation to Local Government reserves, ensuring that this was put on public record; and

iv. Further to this:

- restated their view that councils should have the right to determine the level of council tax for their authorities without facing penalties, but in the light of the current offer of £90m for authorities that agree to freeze the council tax for 2021/22, COSLA should continue to press with urgency for this amount to be baselined for future years, and Leaders agree that the COSLA President write to the First Minister seeking an urgent assurance that the Council Tax incentive funding is base-lined into the Local Government Settlement;
- noted that the letter from the Cabinet Secretary to Cllr Macgregor dated 25th February, regarding flexibility on service concessions, fails to resolve COSLA's concerns and agree to continue to press for a satisfactory resolution on this issue; and in particular:
 - rejects the recently added elements of the flexibility contained in the recent letter to Cllr MacGregor and call on the Scottish Government to allow local government to adopt the annuity method under the terms described and provided to Scottish Government Officials by Directors of Finance. It is unfortunate that the ongoing discussions between COSLA and Scottish Government Officials have failed to produce a suitable and practical solution to the pressures experienced by local government due to Covid-19. In the most recent letter to Cllr MacGregor we see more conditions added, the removal of the potential for the flexibility to provide ongoing support as well as the requirement to move to a depreciation model, all of which is to the detriment of local government. The ask of local government was for practical financial support involving simple changes to the calculation of debt repayment and instead we now have a flexibility that is not what was originally offered; and notes
 - We are expressly concerned that the removal of statutory mitigation has come without notice and we are concerned that it has now become aligned to the flexibilities. The proposal to remove the mitigations over 10 years does nothing to safeguard councils and as such we wholly reject the proposal to remove statutory mitigation given the harm it will do to local government finances and local communities. The contents of the letter to Cllr MacGregor are concerning especially the proposal to remove statutory mitigation and for local government to bring forward proposals on how this could be achieved within 18 months. This new condition is wholly unacceptable and cannot be allowed to stand given the instability and uncertainty that would arise in local government should statutory mitigation be removed. Statutory Mitigation is used to stabilise specific costs from impacting on local Council Tax levels and should Statutory Mitigation be removed then there will be risks that the current stability in local government finances will be gone.
- noted that the proposed levels of capital funding for the next 5 years will severely restrict the ability of councils to invest to assist with the necessary recovery from the Covid19 pandemic, and agree to continue representations for a greatly increased capital allocation.

7. Pay Negotiations Update (paper LD/21/49)

This paper provided Leaders with an update on pay negotiation discussions held with trade union representatives of the SNCT and SJC workforces, which had taken place on 15 and 16 February 2021. Disappointment had been expressed by the trade unions that an offer had not yet been tabled, and Leaders were asked for political direction on proposing an offer set in the context of the Local Government settlement and expectations set as Fair Work employers.

Leaders:

- i. Provided a steer on the potential to make a “best most sustainable and affordable” offer to all bargaining groups following the publication of the final settlement on 8th March;
- ii. Agreed that a special Leaders be called as soon as possible following the final budget announcement on 8th March to provide the COSLA Spokesperson for Resources with a mandate to make an offer to all bargaining groups; and
- iii. Agreed that officers would continue to bring updates to Leaders on the progression of the pay negotiations.

8. Recycling Improvement Fund (paper LD/21/35)

This report provided Leaders with information on the £70m recycling improvement fund announced by Scottish Government to help improve local authority waste collections. This fund would run over 5 years, with the intention that expressions of interest in the fund could be launched in early March 2021.

Leaders:

- i. Agreed that COSLA should proceed with the expression of interest stated in the funding process; and
- ii. Agreed that COSLA should continue to work with Scottish Government, waste management and SOLACE on the delivery of the fund.

9. Local Government Data Platform (paper LD/21/36)

An update was provided on work taken to the Local Government Benchmarking Framework Board on the potential development of a Local Government Data Platform, aimed at creating higher quality data for decision-making and reporting. The report sought a full business case for consideration, and would be brought back to a future meeting.

Leaders:

- i. Noted the information included as part of this report, including any associated opportunities or challenges;
- ii. Agreed that COSLA continue to work in collaboration with Local Government partners, including the Local Government Digital Office and the Improvement Service, in the production of a full business case and options appraisal in relation to the development of a Local Government Data Platform; and
- iii. Agreed that any business case developed should be brought back to Leaders for consideration.

10. CELCIS Protecting Children Programme (paper LD/21/37)

This paper provided Leaders with a summary of work done by the Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children (CELCIS), which receives funding from local authorities to deliver the Protecting Children Programme. The current period of funding was due to come to an end in March 2021 and agreement was sought for a continuation of funding for the Programme.

Leaders:

- i. Noted the update paper and next steps from CELCIS on project activity; and

- ii. Agreed with the COSLA Children and Young People Board that funding for the next three years should be provided from local authorities.

11. Children and Young Peoples' Mental Health Board (paper LD/21/38)

At the end of 2020 the Children and Young People's Mental Health and Wellbeing Programme Board, jointly chaired by COSLA and Scottish Government, drew to a close. Some of the group's deliverables were affected by the outbreak of the pandemic, which had itself impacted on the mental health of children and young people. The deliverables had now been reviewed by Scottish Government and COSLA officers, and a more streamlined and action-focused structure was outlined within the paper for agreement.

It was noted that agreement of the governance structure and deliverables was also concurrently being sought from the Minister for Mental Health.

Leaders:

- i. agreed the proposed Children and Young Peoples Mental Health and Wellbeing Joint Delivery Board Governance Structure and membership; and
- ii. agreed the deliverables for the proposed board.

12. Joint Investigative Interviewing Funding (paper LD/21/39)

This paper provided an update on the current position regarding funding of the National Joint Investigative Interviewing project over 3 years. COSLA Leaders had agreed that officers should work to seek an agreement from Scottish Government that they fund core costs, and request that they meet a proportion of the local implementation cost; they had offered to pay core costs, on the basis that all other costs were met locally. Local Government partners had raised concerns with this commitment and highlighted the need to ensure that there was no barrier to implementation of JII.

An amendment was proposed:

Amendment – Proposed by Cllr John Ross, seconded by Cllr Iain Nicholson.

Add additional recommendation:

- iii. In agreeing recommendation (ii) COSLA is clear that the offer of £2.2m to cover core costs is accepted only with the assurance that there is a commitment to local funding for implementation.

It was noted by Leaders within current pilot areas that the actual cost of implementation has been highlighted through the pilot scheme. Leaders were happy to agree the amendment unanimously.

Accordingly, Leaders:

- i. Noted and gave views on the funding proposal from Scottish Government set out at paragraph 7;
- ii. Agreed that the offer of £2.2 million to cover core costs be accepted and that COSLA and Local Government partners maintain ongoing dialogue with the Scottish Government on any exceptional circumstances – financial or otherwise – which arose over the next three years to ensure that they did not become a barrier to implementation in local areas; and
- iii. In agreeing recommendation (ii) COSLA was clear that the offer of £2.2m to cover core costs was accepted only with the assurance that there was a commitment to local funding for implementation.

13. Independent Review of Adult Social Care (paper LD/21/40)

Leaders were provided with an update on the final report of the Independent Review of Adult Social Care, which was published on 3 February. A Local Government position had been agreed at Special Leaders in February, at which Leaders supported a number of the report's recommendations but raised issues on four key areas. The paper provided an update on work done since then, and on the Scottish Parliament debate on the review.

It was noted that positive suggestions had come from the review, some of which could be implemented without the need for structural change; however, some concerns about funding remained and officers noted that discussions on this were continuing with Scottish Government.

Leaders:

- i. Noted the update on work relating to the IRASC;
- ii. Provided their views on suggested areas of work outlined in paragraph 17;
- iii. Agreed a mandate for officers to work with Scottish Government on areas of common interest which would lead to better outcomes for communities, within the existing structures and accountabilities with the appropriate resource; and
- iv. Agreed that COSLA continue to lobby both Scottish Government and political parties on the concerns around governance and accountability and structural changes. In our lobbying, we would continue to be clear that we were advocating for the same goal, although we disagree with the means of achieving them.

14. Historical Child Abuse Redress Scheme (paper LD/21/41)

This paper provided an update on progress as regards Local Government's contribution to the Redress Scheme and shared a draft proposal for an offer of collective contribution. Leaders had previously agreed in principle to participate in the Redress Scheme, wishing to provide tangible recognition of the long-term impact of child abuse without substantially adversely affecting councils' finances.

It was noted by way of update that the Deputy First Minister had not yet been briefed on this matter, and so ministerial feedback on the scheme and proposal was not yet available.

Leaders:

- i. Noted progression of the Redress for Survivors Bill at Stage 2 and key developments as they related to Local Government; and
- ii. Agreed that the draft proposal for the Local Government contribution to the Redress Scheme be used as a formal negotiating position with Scottish Government, with further updates and any proposed changes to the contribution offer to be brought back to Leaders for formal agreement.

15. Real Living Wage Implementation (paper LD/21/42)

Following a proposal by the Chair of the Fair Work Group, Andy Kerr, and the Scottish Government to replicate the agreement reached last year to apply a national uplift to contractual agreements where the Living Wage applied, this paper provided an update on discussions which had taken place to advance this. There was a difference in views between Local Government and providers, and the COSLA position set out a proposed, pragmatic approach to make progress taking concerns into account. The Local

Government Finance update provided information on work ongoing concerning the shortfall of funding for the living wage policy.

Leaders:

- i. Agreed that COSLA continue to work with Scottish Government on the funding deficit for the living wage;
- ii. Agreed that COSLA officials continue to engage on a national approach, subject to the parameters agreed in paragraph 14; and
- iii. Agreed to delegate final sign off to Group Leaders.

16. Financial Support for Social Care Providers (paper LD/21/43)

This paper provided an update on financial support for social care providers. It was envisaged that financial support to keep providers sustainable and able to meet Public Health guidance would be required into the next financial year, due to the ongoing pandemic.

It was noted that the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport had agreed to extend the current financial support arrangements to June 2021, which Leaders were asked to agree subject to final agreement from Scottish Government.

Leaders:

- i. Agreed to extend the current arrangements for financial support for social care providers until the end of June 2021, subject to agreement by the Scottish Government; and
- ii. Noted the verbal update on the position of the Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport.

17. National Care Home Contract (paper LD/21/44)

This paper updated Leaders on the National Care Home Contract negotiations. Following the position agreed by Leaders in January, a further negotiation meeting had been held with Scottish Care and Coalition of Care Providers Scotland (CCPS).

Leaders:

- i. Agreed the negotiation mandate set out in paragraph 12;
- ii. Agreed that on this basis an offer could be made to the sector of no more than a 3% increase to the nursing and residential rate; and
- iii. Agreed that COSLA and the Local Government negotiating team should engage with the Trade Unions in relation to the NCHC.

18. National Taskforce on Human Rights Leadership (paper LD/21/45)

This report followed agreement at the previous Leaders Meeting to support the recommendations of the incorporation of specific rights for women, people with disabilities, race, older people and LGBTI people in addition to the economic, social, cultural and environmental rights. The National Taskforce had met earlier this week to discuss the complete list of recommendations under consideration, and further recommendations had been developed to support the effective implementation of rights to support both rights holders and duty bearers.

It was noted that while the report was ambitious, officers recognised that successful implementation could only be achieved with significant investment. The report would be

published in the week commencing 15 March, after which a Bill would be taken forward in the next Parliamentary session to incorporate the rights into domestic law.

Some discussion was held on the definitions of rights holders, and the need for a progressive realisation of rights to ensure that adequate support was put in place for duty bearers to comply with their obligations.

Leaders agreed the draft recommendations from the National Taskforce on Human Rights Leadership as set out in the Annex to the paper.

19. COVID Spring Hardship Payment (paper LD/21/46)

This paper provided information on a request from Scottish Government for councils to deliver a Spring Hardship Payment, following the success of Local Government in delivering the £100 Winter Hardship Payments. Eligibility and funding for this payment had been extended to include children eligible for Free School Meals in Early Learning and Childcare settings as well as those of school age, while recognising that identifying these eligible children might be slightly more challenging.

Leaders agreed that local authorities make these payments to eligible families.

20. £500 Payment for HSC (paper LD/21/47)

This paper provided Leaders with an update in relation to the £500 payment for health and social care workers, following further discussion with Scottish Government officials. The paper included a letter of comfort provided by Scottish Government, but could not share the actual legal advice received by COSLA in relation to the scheme and liabilities. The letter of comfort confirmed that Scottish Government had sole liability to make the payment to workers, but that councils would have to follow the Government scheme when administering the payment.

It was noted in discussion that SOLAR could engage with councils' legal departments as the legal advice received by COSLA could not be disseminated without losing legal privilege.

Cllr Douglas Reid moved to agree the recommendations in the paper, with Cllr Scott Farmer seconding.

An amendment was proposed:

Amendment – Proposed by Cllr Douglas Lumsden and seconded by Cllr Andy Kille.

Leaders:

- i. Note the advice about legal risks arising from making the £500 payment to Local Government employees in health and social care;
- ii. Note the assurances received from Scottish Government.
- iii. Note Scottish Government intention to make a one-off £500 pro-rata thank you payment to health and social care staff, and
- iv. Agree that given the risks in employment terms to Local Government regarding administering payments to our employees that we confirm to Scottish Government that they should implement their £500 discretionary payment themselves.

Vote:

Amendment – 5

Abstain – 1

The motion was passed.

Accordingly, Leaders:

- i. Noted the advice about legal risks arising from making the £500 payment to Local Government employees in health and social care;
- ii. Noted the assurances received from Scottish Government; and
- iii. Agreed Local Government should finalise arrangements on the process and implement the Scottish Government payments through payroll.

21. Digital Strategy for Scotland (paper LD/21/48)

This report provided an update on work progressed by Scottish and Local Government to develop a refreshed Digital Strategy for Scotland, following agreement by Leaders in August that this be progressed. A public consultation had been held between September and December, and a number of workshops were held during this consultation period. A draft of the refreshed strategy was provided as an appendix to the paper and Leaders' agreement was sought that it be published in early March with any comments to be reflected in the final version.

Leaders:

- i. Noted the update provided on the development of the refreshed Digital Strategy for Scotland; and
- ii. Agreed that comments emerging be incorporated and that the strategy be then finalised for publication.

22. Digital Citizenship: Civility in Public Life (paper LD/21/50)

This paper provided Leaders with an update on joint Civility in Public Life work between COSLA and local authority associations across the UK to tackle abuse and intimidation faced by councillors, following the 4 nations joint statement released in August 2020. This expressed that intimidation and abuse of councillors was unacceptable and undermined democratic processes.

It was noted that a jointly branded Digital Citizenship guide for Councillors was planned as part of the ongoing Civility in Public Life work and would be brought to a future Leaders' meeting for approval. In advance of the full guide, the LGA had proposed a set of jointly branded infographics to support councillors in handling online abuse and to provide a set of model rules of engagement for elected members to use on their social media channels. The proposed text for these infographics could be found at Appendix One and Leaders were invited to provide comment on this.

Leaders agreed the use of COSLA branding for Digital Citizenship infographics on a) model rules of digital engagement and b) handling online abuse for publication in March 2021.

23. Distribution (paper LD/21/51)

The paper asked Leaders to agree the recommendations from the Settlement and Distribution Group for ten distribution areas detailed in the report. It was noted that the Cabinet Secretary for Finance had provided an update on the Scottish Budget for

2021/22 to the Scottish Parliament on 16 February. Given the significance of the announcements made, the Settlement and Distribution Group re-convened to recommend distributions for three additional funding areas which were considered in the addendum and, as such, added to the original report.

It was also noted that further clarity had been provided from the Scottish Government on the local authority discretionary business fund. It was noted that high-level reporting would be required on broad areas of support delivered but officers had been assured that this would not involve detailed financial reconciliation information, as was the case for other business grant funding.

Leaders:

- i. Agreed the recommendations of the Settlement and Distribution Group as set out in the report and addendum; and
- ii. Noted the updates in relation to funding streams and relevant changes.

24. Elections and Covid-19 (paper LD/21/52)

The report provided an update on the views of the Electoral Management Board for Scotland, Returning Officers, Electoral Registration Officers, Public Health Scotland, Trades Unions, Electoral Commission and Police Scotland regarding the safety of voters, election staff, candidates and their agents during upcoming elections, particularly the Scottish Parliament Election. COSLA officers understood that it remained the view of those organisations that elections could take place, although that view might change if circumstances regarding Covid changed.

Continuing concerns were expressed by some Leaders and Cllr David Ross, seconded by Cllr McCabe suggested an Amendment to the recommendations, which was supported unanimously by the meeting.

Accordingly, Leaders:

- i. noted the update from the Electoral Management Board and, in particular, that whilst Returning Officers believed that it was certainly possible to run elections safely, there were a range of concerns expressed about the challenges that would be faced and the risks involved;
- ii. noted that the update further noted that the situation was clearly very fluid;
- iii. noted that although guidance had been provided, Covid restrictions would continue in place up to and beyond the May election and Leaders continued to have concerns about the health risks to staff and to the public, as well as about the strain put on staffing resources already under pressure due to the pandemic; and
- iv. agreed that COSLA should therefore continue to seek assurances about the practical measures, risks and responsibilities associated with running a safe and fair Parliamentary election in May 2021 and asked Leaders to submit detailed specific concerns and questions to COSLA as a matter of urgency, so that these assurances could be sought from the appropriate bodies and reported back at the first available opportunity.

25. Date of Next Meeting – Friday, 30 April 2021

The date of the next COSLA Leaders Meeting was noted as Friday 30 April 2021, with the caveat that a Special Leaders meeting was likely to be called for a date in March to be determined.

In closing the meeting, Cllr Evison thanked everyone for their attendance and contributions. The meeting closed at 12.50pm.

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