

Conveners Group
19 March 2025
2nd Meeting, 2025 (Session 6)

COSLA informal engagement

Introduction

1. This paper provides a note of the issues that were discussed during the Conveners Group's informal meeting with COSLA on 29 January 2025. It invites the Group to agree some outcomes from this discussion.

Background

2. The Conveners Group agreed to host an informal working lunch with COSLA at its meeting on 27 November 2024. This engagement was subsequently held on 29 January 2025. The attendees were seated at two tables and held small group discussions.
3. Councillor Steven Heddle, Vice President of COSLA, wrote to Liam McArthur, Deputy Presiding Officer and Chair of the Conveners Group, following the meeting suggesting a meeting to agree next steps. At its meeting on 26 February, the Group noted the correspondence from COSLA and agreed to consider a paper on outcomes from this engagement at a future meeting.

Themes discussed

4. The attendees discussed the following issues:
 - General power of competence consultation – including examples from England and how this power might impact on the relationship between local and national government in Scotland.
 - COSLA's 50th anniversary – including COSLA's relationship to wider civic society and how it has evolved as an organisation over the past 50 years to be more representative of the whole of Scotland.
 - European Charter of Local Self-Governance Bill – including an update on the status of this Bill.
 - Fiscal framework – including COSLA's asks for multi-year settlements and less ring-fencing; recent developments related to an increase in National Insurance Employer Contributions and the impact on the third-sector and local government; and a discussion of the rules-based element of the framework.
 - Wider public sector reform – including a discussion of the public sector reform landscape and the extent to which local councillors understand their roles and relevant structures; how Community Planning Partnerships are working in practice; and human rights budgeting.

- Assurance and accountability framework – including how this will relate to the National Performance Framework and the scrutiny of cross-cutting issues; and how the assurance and accountability framework could inform the scrutiny of the implementation of policy priorities and identifying implementation gaps, including through post-legislative scrutiny.
- COSLA's engagement with and experience of giving evidence to parliamentary committee inquiries – including the challenge of capturing representative evidence when practice and experience can vary across all local authorities; the value of written evidence in helping to identify relevant witnesses for oral evidence; whether committees can accommodate more than one COSLA representative at an evidence session (such as an elected representative and a supporting official); COSLA's capacity to respond to all call for views; sharing reflections on the breadth of topics that COSLA could contribute evidence on; and opportunities for COSLA to help scope committee inquiries before they are launched.
- The working relationships between Members, their local authorities and COSLA – including opportunities to share more information about the links between policy issues and delivery at a local and national level.
- Members' knowledge and experience of local government and opportunities for continuous professional development in Session 7 – including opportunities for COSLA to attend CPD sessions being run for new Members early in the new session, as well as committee business planning events and scoping evidence sessions.

Next steps

5. The Group is invited to agree how it would like to take forward this discussion. Options may include:
 - Reflecting on the benefits of this engagement in its legacy paper and recommending that the Conveners Group should continue to engage with COSLA in Session 7.
 - Agreeing that Conveners should share the discussions they have had about COSLA's engagement with and experience of giving evidence to parliamentary committee inquiries with their clerks and committee members.
 - Inviting officials to identify opportunities to promote the outcome of this discussion through SPICe blogs and staff development opportunities.

**Clerks to the Conveners Group
March 2025**