



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

**The Althing and Arctic Circle Assembly
15 – 20 October, Reykjavik, Iceland**



Monica Lennon MSP, Presiding Officer Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP and Ben Macpherson MSP

Introduction

1. This is the report of the visit by a Scottish Parliament delegation to Iceland from 15 to 20 October 2024. The delegation visited the Icelandic Parliament, the Althing, and attended the annual Arctic Circle Assembly.
2. The delegation comprised:
 - Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP, Presiding Officer of the Scottish Parliament
 - Monica Lennon MSP, member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport (NZET) Committee; and
 - Ben Macpherson MSP, substitute member of the NZET Committee

The delegation was accompanied and supported by Mark Brough, Principal Private Secretary, Pater McGrath, Clerk to the NZET Committee, and Jennie Chinembiri, Head of International Relations.

3. As with all outward visits supported by the International Relations Office, it sought to meet the aims of the Scottish Parliament's [International Strategy](#), namely:
 - to promote the Scottish Parliament, its practices and processes as an open, accessible and participative legislature amongst other parliaments and international organisations;
 - to develop the Scottish Parliament's reputation, skills, knowledge and abilities, through this work and its relations with other legislatures and organisations, to represent the people of Scotland in holding the Scottish Government and public bodies to account;
 - to enhance the Scottish Parliament's institutional and international reputation through meetings with other parliamentarians and policy makers; and
 - to support and promote, through the Scottish Parliament's participation, activities which could bring wider economic benefit and added value to Scotland.

Recommendations

- **It is recommended that The Scottish Parliament continues its relationship with the Arctic Circle Assembly through the NZET committee.**
- **It is recommended that IRO follows up on the various exchanges of information and shares these with colleagues across the Parliament.**

Purpose

4. The purpose of the visit was twofold: to visit the Althing to discuss parliamentary business with the Speaker and Members and to further strengthen the friendship between both parliaments; and to attend the annual Arctic Circle Assembly and give a presentation there.

Background

5. This was the first official, cross-party delegation to visit the Althing, led by the Presiding Officer. The Alþingi (anglicised as Althingi or Althing) is the national parliament of Iceland and, like the Scottish Parliament, is also unicameral. It is composed of 63 members. Members are elected for a four-year term by proportional representation, using the D'Hondt method with open list. Iceland has a multi-party system, with numerous parties in which no one party often has a chance of gaining power alone, so parties must work with each other to form coalition governments.
6. The Scottish Parliament has enjoyed a long-standing relationship with the Althing which is reflected in the numerous exchanges at a parliamentary and

political level since 1999. Deputy Presiding Officer, Liam McArthur MSP, led a cross-party parliamentary delegation to the Althing in autumn 2022, followed by a return visit by the Althing's Environment and Communication Committee to Holyrood in January 2023, for example.

7. Shortly before the visit, the Icelandic Prime Minister announced his intention to seek the dissolution of Parliament, resulting in bilateral meetings with some Government ministers being cancelled. However, the Parliamentary part of the programme was still able to go ahead, allowing the delegation the opportunity to witness a historic moment in Icelandic political history, and discuss the developing parliamentary and political situation.
8. The annual Arctic Circle Assembly is the largest annual international gathering on the Arctic, attended by more than 2,000 participants including Heads of State and Governments, Ministers, Members of Parliaments, officials, scientists, business leaders, activists, NGOs, academics, and others from over 60 countries.
9. This year's assembly included a polar dialogue forum and a business forum, enabling dialogue in these specific areas to take place over the three days of the assembly.
10. The topics of focus include peace and security in the Arctic, including the role of NATO; climate change and its effects on the region; green energy, science and research and its role in policy; and community empowerment, including of Arctic Indigenous communities.
11. It is run by the Arctic Circle, a body whose mission is, according to its website, *"to facilitate dialogue and build relationships to address rapid changes in the Arctic"* and *"strengthen the decision-making process by bringing together as many international partners as possible to interact under one large 'open tent'"*.
12. The organisation was established in response to issues facing the Arctic as a result of climate change as well as the growing international interest in the region.
13. The Chairman of the Arctic Circle and former President of Iceland, H.E. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, visited the Scottish Parliament in 2017 and 2018. During these visits he discussed the work and role of the Arctic Circle Assembly with then Presiding Officer Ken Macintosh and encouraged the Scottish Parliament to participate.
14. This was the Parliament's fifth visit to the Assembly. The delegation led a breakout session with Orri Pall Johannsson, MP of the Althing, and Kristin Vala Ragnarsdóttir, Professor of Sustainability Science of the University of Iceland. The presentation was entitled, *"Nature's balance sheet - Scottish and Nordic parliamentarians' views on private finance and natural capital."*

Programme

15. Over the course of the visit, the delegation held a number of bilateral meetings, including with:

- British Ambassador to Iceland, Dr Bryony Mathews;
- Speaker of the Althing, Mr. Birgir Ármannsson;
- Members of the Althing Standing Committee on the Environment and Communication;
- Members of the Althing Judicial Affairs and Education Committee;
- CEO of Nordic Energy Research, Nordic Council of Ministers, Klaus Skytte,
- Chairman of the Arctic Circle Assembly and former President of Iceland, H.E. Mr Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson;
- Secretary General of the Nordic Council, Kristina Háfoss
- Director of Political and Public Affairs, Québec Government in London, Martin Dionne.

16. The clerk to the NZET committee is separately preparing a more detailed note of bilateral meetings and ACA sessions containing points of interest to the NZET Committee that can be shared in due course.

Tuesday 15 October 2024

Meeting with the British Ambassador to Iceland, Dr Bryony Mathews

17. The delegation was invited to the Ambassador's official residence where they were given a political briefing, with a particular focus on the issues likely to matter most to the public in the upcoming general election. Just half an hour before the meeting the Prime Minister had met with the President to officially indicate his intention to seek the dissolution of Parliament.

18. *"This meeting enabled us as delegates to learn more about the Icelandic economy and the net zero aspects of this. We also heard more about the political situation in Iceland and how it considers net zero and other policies, including the connections there are to the UK and Scotland, both in policy and economic terms." Ben Macpherson MSP*



Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP, Dr Bryony Mathew, Ben Macpherson MSP and Monica Lennon MSP

Official Dinner with Speaker Birgir Ármannson

19. The delegation was invited to an official dinner in the new building of the Althing, which was opened in September 2024. This was the first dinner the Speaker had hosted in the new premises. He was joined by most of his Deputy Speakers, representing all the main parties in the Althing.
20. The delegation was able to hear about the latest political developments and remaining milestones in the countdown to the election. They shared learning about the role of Icelandic and Scottish Parliamentarians, including balancing family life with constituency and Parliamentary work, and discussed various issues of parliamentary business and procedure.



L-R: Jörundur Kristjánsson, Oddný G. Harðardóttir MP, Speaker Birgir Ármannson MP, Ragna Árnadóttir, Gísli Rafn Ólafsson MP, Jódís Skúladóttir MP, Peter McGrath, Monica Lennon MSP, Dr Bryony Mathew, Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP, Ben Macpherson MSP and Mark Brough

Wednesday 16 October 2024

Meeting with Speaker Birgir Ármannson, signing of the guest book and a tour of the Althing

21. The delegation continued their discussions around parliamentary business, specifically looking at the rules around question times, the Parliamentary calendar, business hours and work-life balance, conduct in the Chamber, the party balance, how Icelandic parliamentarians engage with social media, and the security of members.
22. The Presiding Officer was invited to sign the guest book and then the delegation was given a tour of the Althing.



Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP and Speaker Birgir Ármannson MP

Meeting with the Judicial Affairs and Education Committee

23. The delegation met with members of the Judicial Affairs and Education Committee of the Althing, and discussed issues including equal representation and participation in parliamentary life and initiatives to support family-friendly working. The Presiding Officer shared information about the Gender Sensitive Audit the Scottish Parliament has recently undertaken.



Monica Lennon MSP, Dagbjort Hakonardottir MP, Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP, Bryndís Haraldsdóttir MP and Ben Macpherson MSP

Visit to the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Exhibition

24. The delegation was taken to the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Exhibition on the work and life of the first female president of Iceland. The delegation found this to be very inspiring, the election of President Finnbogadóttir, a single mother from a non-political background in the arts, is cited as one of the

reasons for progress on gender equality in Iceland. On the international stage, she has promoted peaceful dialogue, helping advance Iceland's "soft power" in the modern era.

Dinner with the Environment and Communications Committee

25. The delegation had a working dinner with the Environment and Communications Committee. Discussions were wide ranging, and focused particularly on green energy generation, from geothermal energy to wind turbines, and on public opinion on these matters.
26. There is a growing relationship between the Scottish Parliament NZET Committee and their Althing counterparts. This is the fourth time members of both committees have met this session and NZET members have found it useful and insightful to "compare notes" on similar challenges in both countries and different policy approaches to solving them. For the second year running, a member of the Icelandic committee also accepted an invitation to be a guest speaker at the Scottish Parliament's break-out session at the Arctic Circle Assembly (see below)

Thursday 17 October 2024

Observing Plenary

27. The delegation was invited to observe the plenary session of the Althing where the Prime Minister formally announced the dissolution of government. The leaders of all of the parties were then invited to respond. This was a historic moment in Icelandic politics.

Thursday 17 – Saturday 20 October 2024

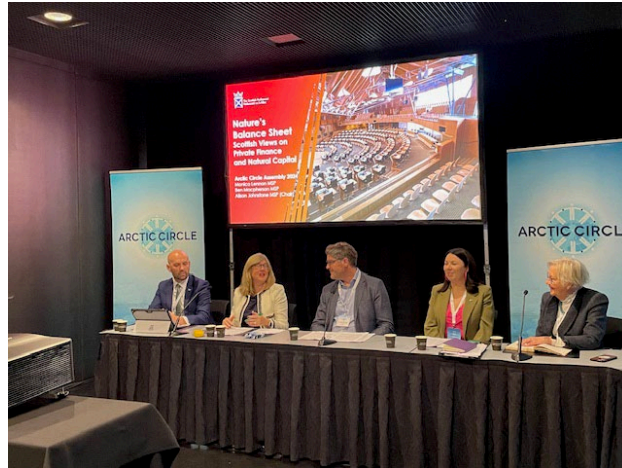
Arctic Circle Assembly

28. In addition to the parliamentary programme, the delegation also had four bilateral meetings at the Assembly, attended four plenary sessions and attended a total of eleven breakout sessions on a variety of policy areas linked to the NZET Committee's remit including, wind energy and green hydrogen; community energy, ecocide law; political participation in the Arctic; waste management; and sustainable housing.
29. Some of the delegation met Klaus Skytte, Managing Director of Nordic Energy Research, an arm of the Nordic Council. Dr Daria Shapovalova of the Centre for Energy Law, Aberdeen University, joined the conversation. This touched on the Centre's role in advising the Council, how community energy projects can be supported and the capacity for growing a "green arc" of wind and hydrogen power in the north-east Atlantic and North Sea region.
30. Three evening networking events hosted by the Prime Minister & Foreign Minister of Iceland, the British Ambassador to Iceland, and the Arctic Circle Assembly conference organisers made up the remainder of the delegation's formal programme of meetings and events.
31. Monica Lennon MSP took part in a panel discussing the role of ecocide law in driving transformational change. She shared the panel with Kristin Vala

Ragnarsdóttir, Professor Emerita of Sustainable Science, University of Iceland; Kate Mackintosh, Executive Director, UCLA Law Promise Institute Europe, Netherlands; and Tinna Hallgrímsdóttir, Climate Risk and Sustainable Specialist, Iceland. The session was moderated by Andrés Ingi Jónsson, Member of the Althing.

Break out Session on Nature's Balance Sheet

32. The Presiding Officer moderated the breakout session led by the Scottish Parliament. Monica Lennon MSP, Ben Macpherson MSP, Kristin Vala Ragnarsdóttir, Professor Emerita, Sustainable Science, University of Iceland and Orri Pall Johannsson MP, of the Althing and Member of the Nordic Council, gave a presentation on, "*Nature's balance sheet - Scottish and Nordic parliamentarians' views on private finance and natural capital.*"
33. The Presiding Officer's opening comments referenced the Scottish Parliament's 25th anniversary, links between Scotland and Iceland, and the Parliament's growing relationship with the Arctic Circle Assembly.
34. Ben Macpherson MSP's presentation set the scene on natural capital in Scotland, referring to the international significance of our forest and peatland ecosystems, their role in combating climate change, their present depleted and damaged state, and the scale of investment needed to meet the ambition of restoring them.
35. Monica Lennon MSP's presentation focussed on some of the policy challenges around leveraging private finance for natural capital restoration, such as providing a voice for local communities, ensuring a just transition, and avoiding speculative bubbles.
36. Presentations from the two guest speakers provided an Icelandic perspective, illustrating the parallels with Scotland – forest and peatland restoration are also the main priorities – and where public opinion stands on these issues.
37. There was a good turnout at the presentation with almost a full house and more questions than there was time to answer. The delegation extended the allocated time to accommodate these extra questions from the audience.



Ben Macpherson MSP, Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP, Orri Pall Johannsson MP, Monica Lennon MSP and Kristin Vala Ragnarsdóttir

Bilateral Meetings

Meeting with President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, Chairman of the Arctic Circle

38. President Grímsson welcomed the delegation to the Arctic Circle. He spoke about the importance of Scottish involvement in the Assembly, its loose, democratic, egalitarian and open structure and the lack of restrictions on who is “allowed” to speak with whom. It is not conducted according to the usual diplomatic rules that would pertain to a state-run international conference, which especially benefits sub-national parliaments.
39. The discussion then touched on the remarkable expansion of international adventure tourism in Iceland and opportunities for Scotland to capitalise on this as a near neighbour; Keflavik’s increasing importance as a hub airport for intercontinental travel and opportunities this potentially presented for Scotland; and potential synergies for Scotland, Iceland and neighbouring countries to develop a shared green energy infrastructure.



Monica Lennon MSP, Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP, President Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, Ben Macpherson MSP

Meeting with Kristina Hafoss, Secretary General of the Nordic Council

40. Kristina Hafoss spoke about the importance of the relationship between the Nordic Council and the Scottish Parliament. She was pleased the Nordic Council had been able to collaborate with the Scottish Parliament on the presentation.
41. The Nordic Council's revised international strategy now specifically names Scotland. This was a move to show the value they place on the relationship with Scotland, identifying the similarities Scotland shares with the Nordic countries.
42. Kristina emphasised the importance of the Nordic Council and the Scottish Parliament keeping each other informed of upcoming events of interest, looking to invite one another to them so we can strengthen our collaboration.
43. She explained that the Council meet five times a year around the region with the main session being in week 44. This will usually result in 40 – 50 recommendations being sent to the Nordic Council of Ministers who are expected to respond to these. Ministers are often invited to Council committees to answer questions. The Nordic Council ensures a focus on similar issues across the Nordic countries, ensuring good practice and effective policy solutions are shared across the region.
44. The Nordic Council has a Nordic summit, which allows the 87 parliamentarians to question all of the prime ministers in the Nordic region.
45. Historically, defence and security had not often been discussed due to Finland and Sweden not being part of NATO, but this has changed. The Council will consider a recommendation at the sitting taking part later in

October to update the aspects of the Helsinki treaty (which set the Council up) in relation to defence and security.

46. There has been a lot of progress in crisis preparedness and planning, especially around health and military in the whole Nordic region.
47. The Nordic Council of Ministers has 12 committees. If a recommendation from the Nordic Council does not fall within the remit of one of those committees then it goes directly to the Ministers of each government for them to come back directly to the Nordic Council on this.
48. The Council's "Vision 2030" is for the Nordic region to be the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030. There are many recommendations in this that would be relevant for Scotland.



Monica Lennon MSP, Rt Hon Alison Johnstone MSP, Kristina Hafoss and Ben Macpherson MSP

Meeting with Martin Dionne, Director of Political and Public Affairs, Québec Government in London

49. The delegation met with Martin Dionne, Director of Political and Public Affairs, Québec Government in London; Remy Rouillard, attaché in research and innovation; and Stephanie Yard, the Arctic officer at the Québec Ministry of International relations.
50. A number of matters were discussed with renewable energy the main focus. In the 20th century Quebec had taken the far-reaching decision to maximise its hydropower capacity, meaning it now has some of the cheapest and greenest energy in the developed world: 94% used in Quebec is hydropower, 5% is wind power. The remaining 1% is diesel, primarily for remote (often First Nations) communities that are off-grid.

51. The geography of Québec makes it challenging to transport energy and supplies in more remote areas and “greening” this remaining 1% through local clean energy production within the community is a priority for the Québec Government.
52. Hydro Québec is a public company controlled by the Québec government, and there is a political consensus that it will never be privatised. It is only very recently that capacity to meet domestic demand has begun becoming an issue. Electricity prices are controlled and, as power isn’t exported, are barely impacted by global events or international energy bottlenecks.
53. Electrical energy has been cheap and abundant for so long that most domestic heating in urban areas has been convection heating, despite its relative inefficiency.
54. This abundance of cheap electricity has led Quebec to become the world’s third biggest producer of Aluminium, with eight smelters. They have gone into partnership with Apple to make it the “greenest aluminium in the world”. Martin will send on more information about what this means.
55. Quebec’s biggest net zero challenge is transport, due to their huge geography and thin population density outside the major cities. There is also quite a “North American” mentality about car ownership. They have a limited rail network. The Québec government is providing subsidies to buy electric cars and install charging points. Martin will send on more information about the electrification of cars and chargers.
56. **Jennie to follow up with the National Assembly about their net zero committee and share information with the NZET committee.**



Monica Lennon MSP, Ben Macpherson MSP, Martin Dionne, Stephanie Yard and Remy Rouillard

Feedback

“It was helpful to learn how other parliaments work and discuss shared interests. Being able to step out of Scotland and see how others see us and perceive us and to learn from other approaches is really valuable. The visit helped to develop good relationships and collaboration. As the Arctic Circle

Assembly is so well established it really is a hub that brings together the main actors in the field. It gives you a different perspective and a strong reminder that we need to be accountable and be clear about what we are doing and why we are doing it.” Monica Lennon MSP

Conclusion

57. As the largest annual international gathering on the Arctic, the Assembly provides a unique opportunity to attend several workshops and discussions on topics of direct relevance to Scottish Parliament committees. The Assembly is distinctive for the breadth of topics it covers, from regional defence and international threats, to energy, ecology, food, transport, community empowerment and culture, giving it value as a “thinkspace” for MSPs attending. It is also distinctive for its openness: practically no meetings are off-limits and Q&A sessions are unvetted. Delegates are largely treated as equals.
58. Just as importantly, however, is the opportunity this annual gathering of Ministers, parliamentarians, NGOs, academics etc provides to hold bilateral meetings on subject matters of direct and topical relevance to members of the Scottish Parliament delegation, particularly those meetings at a political level.
59. The Scottish Parliament presence at, and involvement in, the annual Assembly is very much welcomed by the Chairman of the Arctic Circle Assembly, Icelandic Ministers and Icelandic parliamentarians and it is the view of the International Relations Office that participation in the Assembly enhances both the profile and reputation of the Scottish Parliament, particularly when combined with bilateral meetings in the Althing, with its Environment and Communities Committee, and with Ministers. This enhanced reputation and profile of the Parliament can be seen in the Parliament’s inclusion in the Polar Dialogue Forum and in the excellent attendance for the Parliament’s 2023 and 2024 break-out sessions.
60. It is recommended that participation in the annual Assembly be paused in 2025 due to the Scottish Parliamentary elections in 2026. In Session 7 it is recommended that participation in this conference continue at a committee level and that a delegation led by the Presiding Officer or Deputy Presiding Officer also visit the Althing. Members of the delegation believe that our participation in the work of the Assembly not only enhances the profile and reputation of the Scottish Parliament but is a good professional development opportunity for participating Members.

**International Relations Office
October 2024**

Annex A: Programme

Tuesday 15 October 2024

- 17:30 Meet with Ambassador for a political briefing
- 19:30 Official Dinner hosted by the Speaker of Althing
In attendance: Secretary General, Ms. Ragna Árnadóttir, Deputy Secretary General, Ms. Auður. E Jónsdóttir and Director General, Mr. Jörundur Kristjánsson

Wednesday 16 October 2024

- 09:30 Meet with Speaker of the Althing, Mr. Birgir Ármannsson, followed by signing of the Guest Book and a tour of the Althing.
In attendance: Secretary General, Ms. Ragna Árnadóttir, Deputy Secretary General, Ms. Auður. E Jónsdóttir and Director General, Mr. Jörundur Kristjánsson
- 11:00 Meeting with representatives of the Judicial Affairs and Education Committee (gender equality is under the auspices of the committee), followed by a working lunch.
- 14:15 Visit to the Vigdís Finnbogadóttir Exhibition, on the life and work of the first female president of Iceland. [Við Suðurgötu](#), 107 Reykjavík.
- 17:00 Reception: British Ambassador's Residence, Laufásvegur 33
Reception to bring together representatives from the UK who are taking part in the Assembly. Hosted by British Ambassador to Iceland, H.E. Dr Bryony Mathew.
- 19:00 Working dinner with representatives of the Environment and Communications Committee
In Attendance: 1st Deputy Chair, Ms. Þorbjörg Sigríður Gunnlaugsdóttir, 2nd Deputy Chair, Mr. Vilhjálmur Árnason, Committee Member, Mr. Andrés Ingi Jónsson, Committee Member, Ms. Þórunn Sveinbjarnardóttir, Committee Member, Mr. Njáll Trausti Friðbertsson, Committee Clerk, Ms. Sigrún Rósa Björnsdóttir

Thursday 17 October 2024

- 09:00 Breakout Session: Explore the chill-building sustainable energy futures
- 10:00 Plenary Meeting in Althing, observed from the Gallery for Distinguished Guests
- 10:15 Bilateral meeting with Klaus Skytte, CEO, Nordic Energy Research, Nordic Council of Ministers, Norway: Mapping Hydrogen Valleys
- 11:20 Bilateral meeting with Bryndís Haraldsdóttir, President, Nordic Council, and Oddný G. Harðardóttir, Vice-President, Nordic Council
- 12:20 Lunch for elected representatives
Organised by: Nordic Council
Invited to the lunch event are representatives of parliaments, city councils, Indigenous Peoples' Organisations, youth organisations, as well as governments and states, accompanied by their staff.
- 13:15 Opening Session: Part 1
[See conference programme for speaker details and session highlights](#)
- 16:05 Opening Session: Part 2.
[See conference programme for speaker details and session highlights](#)
NB; Includes speech by EU commissioner on “The Arctic- energy security for Europe?”
- 18:15 Breakout session: The role of ecocide law in driving transformational change
Organised by: Stop Ecocide International/Stöðvum vistmorð
Academic and political panel includes member of NZET counterpart committee in Iceland and Nordic Council chair
- 19:15 Welcome Reception: Hosted by the Prime Minister of Iceland & the Foreign Minister of Iceland: Food, Drinks and Networking
[See conference programme for speaker details and session highlights](#)

Friday 18 October 2024

- 09:35 Breakout session: The power of ecocide law: In conversation with JoJo Mehta and Pertti Salolainen
Organised by: Stop Ecocide International; WWF Finland

- 10:45 Breakout session: Plenary Session 1
[See conference programme for speaker details and session highlights](#)
 Includes UK arctic Minister
- 14:50 Presentation: Nature's balance sheet- Scottish and Nordic parliamentarian's views on private finance and natural capital
 Organised by: The Scottish Parliament
- 16:20 Bilateral meeting with Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, Chairman of the Arctic Assembly
- 17:10 Bilateral meeting with Kristina Háfoss, Secretary General of the Nordic Council Secretariat
- 17:10 Breakout session: Nordic Collaboration for Hydrogen trucks deployment is decarbonising the Arctic
 Organised by: Nordic Innovation; Next Wave project partners (Nordic hydrogen stakeholders & Industry Representatives)
- 18:20 Breakout session: Nordic hydrogen valleys: Opportunities in the Arctic
 Organised by: Nordic Energy Research

Saturday 19 October 2024

- 09:00 Breakout session: Orkney's links with the Arctic and shared aspirations
 Organised by: Orkney Islands Council, Scotland
- 11:20 Breakout Session: Maritime transport in Arctic waters: future economic and technology trends
 Organised by: Arctic Energy Office, U.S. Department of Energy
- 14:25 Plenary 1
[See conference programme for speaker details and session highlights](#)
- 16:30 Plenary 2
[See conference programme for speaker details and session highlights](#)
- 18:30 Ritual: A unique music experience
- 19:30 Reception: Music, dance and refreshments