

## **Welcome Speech (estimated 15 mins, max 2000 words)**

Dear colleagues, delegates, County Councillors from West and Northwest Regions in Iceland.

Firstly, welcome! Welcome to Scotland and to COSLA Verity House.

My name is Councillor Steven Heddle, and I am COSLA's Vice President, joining you remotely from my home in the Orkney Islands.

I have been a Councillor here in Kirkwall since 2007, acting as political and civic leader from 2012-2017.

I have the pleasure of opening this information session and saying some introductory words about Scottish Local Government and the 32 Scottish Local Authorities or Councils as they are commonly known here.

After this, COSLA officers from across our policy teams have put together a programme for you to hear about our key priorities and work in different policy areas.

We understand a main focus of your visit to Scotland has been regional and rural development and you will have the opportunity to hear from our Business Gateway national unit, after a broad introduction to COSLA.

And then after a break, colleagues will take you through our work on a just transition to net zero and on community wellbeing.

Local Government in Scotland is at the forefront of efforts to support our communities, be that through supporting the education of our children and young people; delivering vital homelessness and housing services;

or playing a key role in prevention and in improving the social determinants of health.

Millions of people rely on the services that Local Government in Scotland delivers every day. Together, councils spend almost £19 billion a year on local services ( about 3 trillion kronur) and employ over 250,000 people – nearly 10% of all employment in Scotland.

Local Government in Scotland also has a good track record of responding to climate change and is committed to the Scottish target of carbon neutrality by 2045. We are therefore really pleased for this chance to talk to you about our approach towards achieving a just transition to net zero.

We hope you have been able to make yourself very comfortable and are enjoying use of the facilities in Verity House.

## **Iceland**

Scotland and Iceland share a rich historical and deeply cultural relationship.

I think we also share a similar mindset and geographical location that makes it easier for us as nations and local authority partners to co-operate, forge links, and work together.

While there are of course also differences, both in Scotland and in Iceland we will share certain challenges and opportunities in serving our communities, such as:

- Covid recovery, budgetary pressures, rising costs, increased service demands.
- Difficulties in the delivery of services in rural and remote areas.
- Or those in decarbonising our societies and achieving a sustainable and just transition to net zero.

We really do have a lot to learn from each other. And Scottish Local Authorities are keen to continue to engage with you, our Icelandic counterparts.

Scottish Local Government remains committed to positive connections with the rest of the world and to constructive exchange with our peers in Europe and beyond.

### **Introducing COSLA...**

The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) was formed in 1975, to act as the representative voice of Local Government.

We work to protect, support and improve democratic Local Government in Scotland.

While established in 1975, standing up for Scotland's local priorities goes back 800 years. We evolved from the Convention of Royal Burghs, once the oldest representative body in Europe.

We provide political leadership on national issues, and work to improve local services and strengthen local democracy as a legitimate, respected sphere of government.

As a politically led, cross-party organisation, what we do, and how we do it, is decided democratically by elected councillors from across our members.

Our decision-making system is designed to put member councils at the heart of the policy development process.

Overall, we want to enhance the status and position of Local Government as part of the governance of Scotland; and to promote the welfare and good governance of the people living here.

In our endeavour to help build better and more equal communities, we are guided by key principles:

- **STRENGTHENING LOCAL DEMOCRACY:** Building local accountability and taking decisions as close as possible to the people they affect.
- **WORKING TOGETHER LOCALLY:** Joining up public services to get better results and greater efficiency in the places they serve.
- **DELIVERING OUTCOMES:** Making a long-term difference to people's lives by focusing on impact not inputs, and by preventing problems before they arise.
- **FOCUSING ON COMMUNITIES:** Building services around local priorities and being accountable to local people.
- **DEFENDING LOCAL CHOICES:** Freeing up councils to reflect local circumstances by maximising flexibility and autonomy over decisions and resources.

COSLA also provides specialist shared services related to local business advice, online recruitment, digital transition and Trading Standards and consumer protection. Some of these services you will hear about in more detail this morning.

## **I'd like to speak about Local Government in Scotland...**

The United Kingdom does not have a single system of Local Government and the competence, or responsibility, for Local Government is devolved to the Scottish Parliament.

The 32 Local Authorities in Scotland are unitary authorities, a single level of local government providing a wide range of services to an average population of 150,000 citizens. Quite different from your Local Government system in Iceland.

The Local Authorities have identical functions and powers and are responsible for delivering local services in Education; Social Care, Housing; Environmental Protection; Public Transport and Roads; Development Planning; Economic Development and Regeneration; Leisure and Recreation.

Scotland has in fact some of the largest municipalities in Europe, by population and geography. Many contain a mix of rural and urban areas, or are island communities like in my own authority.

We have overall the lowest ratio of Councils to population, the lowest number of elected members to population and the largest average geographical scale of local governments in Europe.

Because the legal competence for Local Government is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, COSLA operates in a distinct jurisdiction and has distinct Scottish focus.

Scottish Local Government has actually always been a separate jurisdiction since the creation of the United Kingdom over three centuries ago.

We however work closely with other national associations of Local Authorities in the UK including our partners in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

We also work closely with our European colleagues and national associations of local authorities in Europe, including the Icelandic association for Local Government SAMBAND that represents the 64 Icelandic municipalities.

Both COSLA and the Icelandic association SAMBAND are members of CEMR, the Council of European Municipalities and Regions, the Europe wide Local Government association.

In fact, we both share offices in the House of Municipalities in Brussels alongside other Nordic countries including Denmark, Sweden and Norway.

Working together to protect the autonomy of local governments and provide for their participation in the European and international institutions.

This often involves the United Nations and concerns important global sustainability agendas, the UN Paris Climate Agreement and UN Sustainable Development Goals.

We are aware that Iceland is fully committed to the implementation of the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development both nationally and internationally, as well as to meeting the aims of the Paris Climate Agreement. Just as we are here in Scotland.

There is strong ongoing political support to continue our relations with other countries on shared global agendas, particularly as our members are keen to retain their technical and political connections post EU Exit.

And we seek to promote Scotland and Scottish Local Government as good global citizens.

Engaging with our peers on matters related to local autonomy, democratic participation, human rights and public service innovation.

In our view, the need for innovation and collaboration between local authorities in Europe to respond to multiple crises has taken on new urgency and importance.

### **I'd like now to speak about the COSLA Plan**

To best respond to the unprecedented and serious challenges Local Government and communities in Scotland continue to face, COSLA has launched a Plan for Local Government in Scotland.

Colleagues will cover the COSLA Plan in more detail, but by way of introduction, this sets out our vision and priorities for Local Government and communities across Scotland in six key areas:

- Strengthen Local Democracy
- Secure Sustainable Funding
- Improve the Wellbeing of Individuals, Families and Communities
- Enhance Education and Support for our Children and Young People
- Deliver a Just Transition to a Net Zero Economy
- Support the Most Vulnerable in our Communities.

Over the next 5 years, COSLA's work will focus on these 6 key priority areas to ensure that Local Government builds on its record of being a leader of transformational change across public services.

With this plan we strive to ensure that Local Government has the powers and the resources it needs to deliver the highest quality services that allow everyone to live well locally.

And also to support Local Government to build an ambitious vision for Scotland's future – one based on the empowerment of people and communities.

Individuals and communities must be further empowered through strong local democratic decision-making processes and participation.

By ensuring the voices of local people are heard across all public services through devolved decision making, we can address the huge social and financial costs of persistent inequality that exist still in this country.

Another recent important development for us, is a new partnership agreement with the Scottish Government.

The Verity House Agreement, as it is known, sets out principles for working together to empower local communities, tackle poverty, transform the economy and provide high-quality public services.

This agreement aims to reset the relationship between central and local government and create a new way of working as a partnership of equals – discussing key issues as early as possible and using our collective expertise to deliver for communities.

It is a high-level framework for our partnership, encouraging respect for each other's democratic mandate so that we can work together more effectively.



We have agreed to approach shared priorities with the mantra of local by default, national by agreement, with presumption in favour of local flexibility.

And there is a shared commitment to giving the right to local self-governance meaning in Scots law by incorporating the European Charter of Local Self-Government of the Council of Europe. Something that we know is protected in Iceland by the Constitution.

### **So to conclude...**

I understand that you have already been in Scotland for a number of days and have enjoyed an extensive programme, including visiting Loch Ness and the Cairngorms National Park. I really hope you are enjoying your time here.

COSLA officers will now take over and spend some time talking to you about their respective policy areas, beginning with Simon Cameron for a more in-depth look at Scottish Local Government.

We are equally keen to hear from you about the main challenges you face in Iceland, how you plan to cope with the transition to a net zero economy and how you improve wellbeing and growth in your local communities.

For certain, local decision-making and leadership will continue to be essential in tackling the ongoing challenges we face, including supporting our communities through the current cost crisis; facing the ongoing challenges of COVID recovery; and working to combat climate change and ensure community resilience.

On behalf of COSLA, I would like to wish you a very successful event this morning and the best for the remainder of your trip! Thank you.