Connecting Scotland - how Scottish organisations engage internationally

Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)

The Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA) is the representative voice of Scottish Local Authorities at a Scottish, UK and international levels. COSLA is pleased to provide supplementary evidence to this second strand of this inquiry. In the first strand on “How the Scottish Government engages internationally” we commented on our agreed views on the big political issues and the way EU policy concerning councils is shaped in Brussels and domestically. In this additional evidence for this second strand we focus on the more operational aspects of COSLA EU engagement.

Our focus is on European Union or international provisions that specifically affect Scottish Councils’ ability to define and provide public services by promoting subsidiarity and partnership working across all levels of governance. In so doing our EU policy priorities are structured around the key principles defined by the COSLA Constitution: the empowerment of local democracy; integration rather than centralisation; outcomes rather than inputs; and the protection of local choice and accountability. In March 2015 COSLA Convention approved our latest international priorities as shared with this Committee recently.

Very often issues specifically or disproportionately affecting Local Authorities both in legal and financial terms are overlooked in the big picture of Member State priorities and the consequential negotiations in Brussels. COSLA’s specific role is to ensure that this does not happen so that Scottish Local Government can make a constructive contribution to European governance.

Political representation:
COSLA nominates and supports the local members representing Scotland at the EU Committee of the Regions: Cllr Corrie McChord, Scotland’s longstanding CoR member sits on the Environment, Climate Change and Energy (ENVE) Commission, Cllr Tony Buchanan is the Vice President of the Natural Resources (NAT) Commission dealing with rural, marine, tourism and consumer protection, Cllr Barbara Grant is a member of the Commission for Social Policy, Education, Employment, Research and Culture (SEDEC) and our newest member Cllr Gary Robinson is member of the Territorial Cohesion Policy (COTER) Commission dealing with Structural Funds and Transport. In addition to participating and amending draft reports Scottish CoR members have in the past been Rapporteurs, leading CoR Opinions on draft EU legislation such as Soil, Innovation Union or EU funding for local areas - Community Led Local Development.

COSLA nominates and supports the local members of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe (Cllrs Harry McGuigan and Mairi Evans) and its Governance Committee. Cllr McGuigan has recently led, with officer support from COSLA and the Improvement Service, a review of local governance changes across most European countries (shared services, centralisation, performance management, community planning). COSLA have also significantly contributed to the official Council of Europe monitoring report on the application in the UK and Scotland of the Charter of Local Self Government to which the UK is a signatory. There is an outstanding need for the report’s recommendations to be acted on through the transposition of the Charter’s provisions into UK and Scots law.
COSLA is the Scottish national member of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), Europe’s largest and oldest association of European municipalities. Cllr Mairi Evans is a member of its Executive Bureau and Chair of the Committee on Young Local and Regional Elected Representatives.

COSLA is also working on further engagement opportunities at an EU level, including through the Scottish Locally-Engaged European Representatives (SLEER) Group to which all councillors having an EU role or mandate are invited to attend.

**Policy development:**
COSLA’s Brussels-based EU office shares joint responsibility for managing our priority EU policy development and legislative processes from their inception through political endorsement up to the point of transposition into UK or Scottish Law. Our EU policy priorities have been previously politically agreed and broadly follow the Commission’s Legislative Work Programme. Policy development relies on working across several COSLA teams and with contact officers across the Member Councils, European Consortia and officer professional groups. The EU function reports to the Chief Officer - Communities and politically to the different COSLA Executive Groups, Leaders and Convention.

The extended timeframes for EU policy development and legislation allow timely negotiation to be undertaken with the Scottish or UK Governments as appropriate. This helps inform the Scottish and UK negotiating positions. The same applies to the overall EU priorities. This year the UK Government explicitly cited COSLA’s priorities as part of the UK negotiating for 2015.

At the broad EU level, policy development and negotiation with Commission officials or MEPs is most commonly done in partnership with our sister national associations of Local Authorities from other countries as well as with our European association - the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR). COSLA shares premises with many of our opposite numbers in the House of Municipalities in Brussels which facilitates policy development, intelligence sharing and logistic pooling. Our European umbrella body CEMR as well as other major European local authority networks are also based in the House of Municipalities.

COSLA chairs the CEMR Expert Group on Territorial Cohesion and Local Development bringing together experts on Structural Funds and rural development across the EU. This involves speaking on behalf of European local government in a number of committees and working groups organised by the European Commission. COSLA also plays a significant role in other CEMR groups in particular the Employers’ Platform where we developed the CEMR position on the Working Time Directive as well as the groups dealing Better Regulation, Waste and Procurement. Through the CEMR delegation COSLA also sits in the European Social Dialogue which an official EU forum is bringing together local government employers, public sector trade unions and the European Commission.

In addition to formulating submissions to EU consultations or suggesting changes to draft EU legislation COSLA also regularly gives evidence on these issues at hearings at the Scottish, Westminster and European Parliaments. Indeed we provide specific briefings to Scottish MEPs on all key priority matters relevant for Scottish Councils being dealt in their specific committees.
Partnership working is also undertaken with civil servants of the UK and Scottish Governments based in Brussels as well as the other Scottish and UK public sector organisations represented there. Similarly, COSLA also engages with other key stakeholders to provide a local government perspective to wider policy discussions, for instance in networks dealing with local sustainability and climate action or health inequalities, and occasionally EU think tanks.

Further engagement
Finally although the role of the EU function is -like the rest of COSLA- focused on policy and legislation we try to support our member councils as they engage in EU project development and facilitation, given our location in Brussels and the multi-lingual nature of the staff. We are also the official Scottish coordinators on town twinning and of the EU Covenant of Mayors. COSLA also communicates local government views widely via twitter, press releases for both Scottish and EU media and regular policy updates to senior elected members.

Equally we facilitate visits of officer and delegations to Brussels as well as facilitating delegations visits to Scotland. Recently these have included the Finnish, Norwegian, Danish or Icelandic delegations. Often a result of these visits is to allow us to draw useful ideas for policy development – indeed we drew heavily from the suggestions from our peers to formulate submissions to the Commission on Strengthening Local Democracy in Scotland, the Smith Commission and the new Commission on Local Finances.

Serafin Pazos-Vidal, Head of Brussels Office

April 2015