RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY COMMITTEE

SOUTH OF SCOTLAND ENTERPRISE BILL

SUBMISSION FROM COSLA

COSLA welcomes the opportunity to provide written evidence on the South of Scotland Enterprise Bill. This evidence has been informed via engagement with the two local authorities (Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway Councils) who will be covered by the boundary of the proposed new Agency. Therefore, COSLA is also supportive of the positions put forward by these two councils in their individual written evidence submissions.

Do you agree that the South of Scotland Enterprise Agency should be created?

COSLA supports the creation of the South of Scotland Enterprise Agency to help enable the South of Scotland to fulfil its ambition to be transformed into a vibrant rural economy. Creation of this new Agency will help ensure a strong and sustainable economy for the South of Scotland which builds upon its communities and has enterprise and cohesion at its heart, and as a result provides further economic and social opportunities for the region. Part of this will also be ensuring that entrepreneurship and innovation are further encouraged, and that the population of the region can be maintained by ensuring high quality education, training and employment opportunities. All of this will help ensure that that South of Scotland can be a significant contributor to the overall Scottish and UK economies.

The South of Scotland currently faces a number of challenges including: low wealth creation; being one seventh of Scotland’s land area, and the most sparsely populated region outside the Highlands and Islands; low average weekly wages; outward migration of young people and a reducing workforce; significant proportion of the regions workforce being employed in agriculture, fishing and manufacturing; relatively low proportions of its workforce employed in growth sectors; and substantial connectivity issues in terms of transport and digital infrastructure.

COSLA considers that the South of Scotland Enterprise Agency will be crucial in order to address these challenges; and will provide an overall emphasis on place and geography which can help bolster the economy of the South of Scotland through an inclusive approach to growth which is tailored to the specific circumstances and needs within the South of Scotland. Such an approach is consistent with COSLA’s view that a one size fits all approach to local and regional economic growth is not appropriate and local authorities, and wider economic regions should be empowered to help grow their economies inclusively in ways that are tailored to local circumstances and needs. Furthermore, while COSLA is and remains supportive of the approach being adopted in the South of Scotland to drive inclusive economic growth, COSLA also recognises that other approaches to regional economic growth require to be considered and supported in other parts of the country in order for the Scottish economy as a whole to flourish.
Do you agree with the proposals for the body’s constitution, purposes, powers and duties? If you do not agree with the proposals, please set out specifically what you would like to change.

The proposals for the South of Scotland Enterprise Agency’s constitution, purposes, powers and duties are consistent with those relating to Scottish Enterprise and Highlands and Islands Enterprise.

COSLA recognises that the Board of the new Agency will be appointed via the standard approach to public appointments in Scotland to ensure transparency and openness.

COSLA would also highlight the need for strong relationships between the Agency and the two local authorities within its boundaries to ensure joined up strategic planning to benefit the economy of the South of Scotland.

COSLA welcomes the broad definition of the aims in the draft Bill as do the two local authorities within the boundary of the new Agency as this will allow flexibility for the new agency to achieve its aims by designing appropriate interventions. Likewise, COSLA supports the specific aims to: drive forward the economy; sustain communities; and capitalise on people and resources.

COSLA understands that transfer of properties and liabilities from Scottish Enterprise will be required in order to establish the new Agency.

COSLA agrees that the South of Scotland boundary comprises the local authority areas of Scottish Borders Council and Dumfries and Galloway Council.

Is there anything else that should be included or excluded from the Bill?

The Bill as drafted aligns with the responses provided by Scottish Borders and Dumfries and Galloway Councils and supported by COSLA’s submission to the prior consultation on the South of Scotland Enterprise Agency.

Nevertheless, there are some issues which require to be considered by the new Agency once established, although it may not be that these require to be on statutory footing.

One of these issues is leadership and support for the South of Scotland at a national level and most strongly within Scottish Government. This may mean that the Agency needs to be proactive, particularly in relation to issues around transport and connectivity to ensure that the case for the South of Scotland is effectively promoted in relation to infrastructure investment.

The second of these issues relates to stakeholder engagement and consultation at local and regional levels. While the new Agency may likely have to play an advocacy role for the South of Scotland at the national level, the Agency itself must be influenced by the partners, stakeholders and communities within its boundaries and its strategic direction must be
informed by meaningful engagement and consultation. While any model of consultation must be tailored to the needs of the South of Scotland the model utilised by Highlands and Islands Enterprise may be a useful starting point to build upon.

The final issue relates to young people and the substantial challenge of reversing the number of young people moving away from the South of Scotland in pursuit of educational or career opportunities. Clearly in order to address this challenge the new Agency will require to actively consult with young people and a process may require to be established in this respect so that the South of Scotland once again can be attractive for young people to remain and pursue their education or careers.