Official Report
Aithisg Oifigeil

Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Comataidh na Roinn Eòrpa, Cùisean Taobh A-muigh agus Cultar

Tuesday 23 June 2026

Session 7

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EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE
1st Meeting 2026, Session 7

CONVENER

*Patrick Harvie (Glasgow) (Green)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Colin Beattie (Midlothian North) (SNP)
*Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP)
*David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD)
*Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP)
*Jenny Young (Central Scot and Lothians West) (Lab)

*attended

LOCATION

The David Livingstone Room (CR6)

Scottish Parliament

Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee

Tuesday 23 June 2026

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:30]

Interests

The Convener (Patrick Harvie): Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the first meeting of the Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee in session 7 of the Scottish Parliament. We have no apologies to record for today's meeting.

The first agenda item is the declaration of registrable interests that are relevant to the work of the committee. Members are aware of the requirement to make oral declarations. I will start, and then we will go round the table.

I have no registrable interests in relation to the committee's remit. However, the voluntary section of my entry in the register of interests notes that I am a vice-president of the European Movement in Scotland, which is an unpaid position for which I receive no other benefits.

Senga Beresford (South Scotland) (Reform): I have no registerable interests at all.

Keith Brown (Clackmannanshire and Dunblane) (SNP): I have no interests in addition to the ones that I have already declared in my declaration of interests.

Colin Beattie (Midlothian North) (SNP): I direct members to my declaration of interests. In the voluntary section, that shows that I am the vice-chair of the National Mining Museum Scotland, which is in receipt of funds from the United Kingdom Government. I am also a director trustee of the National Library of Scotland Foundation.

Pauline Stafford (Bathgate) (SNP): I direct members to my entry in the register of interests. I am a sitting councillor on West Lothian Council—I have a dual mandate. I was also employed by the National Youth Choir of Scotland until May this year.

David Green (Caithness, Sutherland and Ross) (LD): I have no registrable interests, but I would like to declare that, prior to my election, I was an employee of Christian Aid and, before that, the Red Cross.

Jenny Young (Central Scotland and Lothians West) (Lab): I have no registrable interests to declare, but the voluntary section of my entry in the register of interests shows that I am a member of the General Teaching Council for Scotland and of the GMB.

The Convener: Thank you all very much.

I remind members that, as well as this declaration in the first meeting, it is expected that members should make a similar oral declaration of relevant interests at future meetings if there is something on the agenda that relates to one or more registrable interests.

Deputy Convener

09:32

The Convener: The next item is the choosing of a deputy convener. Members will be aware that Parliament has agreed that a member of the Reform UK Party should be the deputy convener of the committee, and Senga Beresford is the member of the Reform UK Party on the committee.

Does any member want to nominate the deputy convener?

David Green: I would be happy to nominate Senga Beresford.

The Convener: Thank you. Senga Beresford has been nominated.

Senga Beresford was chosen as deputy convener.

The Convener: Senga, do you want to add a few words?

Senga Beresford: This is all quite new to me, although, culture-wise, I probably know a wee bit more. At this meeting, I want to sit back and listen, if that is okay, and to hear what members have to say, so that I can spend the summer reading up and getting caught up with what has been happening and what our plans are.

The Convener: That is absolutely fine. I am sure that we will all be doing that.

Decision on Taking Business in Private

09:33

The Convener: The next agenda item is a decision on whether to take item 6, which is further discussion of the work programme, in private. Do members agree to do so?

Members *indicated agreement*.

Membership of External Bodies

09:33

The Convener: The purpose of the next item is to decide on the committee's representation for the next meeting of the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities of the Council of Europe. As explained in the papers that have been circulated, the committee is responsible for Parliament's representation on a number of external bodies. The suggestion is that we return to most of those later in the year, but one body, the congress, has a meeting upcoming in October. That will be the last meeting under the congress's current mandate. At that point, we will have to decide representation on the subsequent mandate, which relates to meetings from March onwards.

Keith Brown was a member of the predecessor committee in the previous session and was the representative on the congress. I therefore suggest that we simply agree that Keith continues in that role—I think that he is willing to do so and to take part in the meeting in October—and that we then consider all the external bodies together at a later time. Unless any discussion is required, is that agreed?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: Thank you for undertaking that, Keith. We look forward to hearing how the congress goes.

Work Programme

09:35

The Convener: The next item is a discussion on our work plan. This is the first opportunity that members have had to explore and express, on the record, ideas or initial reflections about what our work programme should cover. As I said, members have been given a series of papers and briefing notes on the committee's remit and the work of our predecessor committee, including its legacy report.

After we have had our initial discussion, I will ask whether the committee wants to organise a business planning day. It is generally good practice for a committee to host such an event—certainly in the first year of a new session, perhaps towards the end of the summer recess—in order for members to get to know one another a little better and to hear from external groups or guests about the work that we choose to undertake.

Again, I will go round the table and ask everyone to offer some reflections. I will start with a few from me. I note the postponement yesterday of the United Kingdom and European Union summit due to changing UK circumstances, as well as the letter that we all received from the Deputy First Minister regarding the interministerial standing committee, which will meet tomorrow.

I will mention a few other topics. I think that all members will recognise the importance of the work on broadcasting that was done in the previous session. In the light of Ofcom's recent decision on STV and the further BBC cuts that have been announced, we might need to revisit the issue.

Some work was done on wider support for the screen sector. We should be conscious that the Scottish Government was elected on a manifesto that included a proposal to separate Screen Scotland from Creative Scotland. It would be useful for us to understand the sector's response to the proposal and its expectations of how it would work.

There is also an opportunity to resolve some of the ambiguity about the games industry, which receives some support from the culture budget and some from the economy budget. There is a bit of an ambiguous relationship in that regard.

On a related point, there is often a huge amount of debate about social media and artificial intelligence in relation to age limits and phones in schools, but, in my view, there is now a very powerful impact on broadcasting, journalism and access to culture, as well as the requirement for the Scottish Government to develop a disinformation strategy. I want to know whether

there is an appetite in the committee to consider how we might fit such issues into our work plan.

Our predecessor committee took some interest in the fair work agenda in the culture sector. The Scottish Government brought together an independently chaired fair work task force, which reported its recommendations in December, and it will be important for the committee to stay on top of how the sector and the Government are implementing those recommendations.

The Scottish National Party also committed in its manifesto to introducing a culture bill. I think that it is reasonable to expect that that legislation will be co-developed with the sector. If that is the case and we can get early indications from the Government about its intentions on timing, the committee will have an important opportunity to provide a space in which the sector can, on the record and in public, express its view, or multiple views, on the direction of travel for that legislation.

On the other side of our remit, the Welsh First Minister yesterday noted that he believes that there is an opportunity, given the changing UK political context, to seek improvements in the relationship between the UK Government and the devolved Governments. It is fair to say that, in exploring such issues, our predecessor committee never buried or ignored the fact that there were significant political differences on constitutional questions, but those differences should not prevent us from finding common ground if it exists—and it does exist, because there were opportunities to find common ground. I think that we should continue in that spirit, and I would like to know whether the committee has an appetite for stronger joint working with our counterpart committees, particularly in the devolved Administrations and the devolved Parliaments, in advance of UK-wide interparliamentary work.

Finally, the context of the change of leadership at UK level may also alter the dynamics. We have already heard that the UK-EU summit is going to be postponed, but I think that it is fair to say that most people would be surprised if there was any fundamental change in the current direction towards having a closer relationship with Europe. In fact, the new Prime Minister, whoever that might be, might want to go further and faster.

The UK European partnership bill was announced in the King's speech. That is already part of the UK Government's programme, and it will be important for us to understand what the Scottish Government's expectations are, to what extent it is involved in the shaping of that legislation, and what the implications could be for the devolution settlement and the Sewel convention.

Those are my initial thoughts. I will now hand over to members. Every member is welcome to offer any reflections.

Senga Beresford: My initial thoughts on coming in here were that I would just be listening and taking in what had been happening before. I am very interested in the Commonwealth games and why games are an area that is being cut back on. I think that we should invest in sport, so I would like to look into that a bit more.

I am also interested in strengthening our relationship with the EU, business-wise. However, apart from that, as I said, I would like to study this through the summer and come back with some better inputs.

The Convener: That is absolutely fine—thank you.

Keith Brown: I very much agree with the convener's comments. I have a couple of things to add, for the benefit of the clerks, about what I am interested in. The inquiry on intergovernmental relations was perhaps one of the most interesting inquiries that our predecessor committee held. As the convener said, even though members of the committee had very different political standpoints, I think—although I do not want to speak for others—that we all agreed that it was a bit of a mess. When you discover what is going on underneath the two Governments, you find that the architecture is a mess, so I think that the issue deserves further scrutiny. I would be interested in that.

I know that this will be heresy to some, but I cannot say that I am particularly interested in the EU law tracker stuff on alignment. I find it very dry. We have to know what is happening in the EU, but I think that spending a lot of time on that is perhaps not the best use of our time. A more focused approach, including in papers that come to the committee, is far more beneficial to me as a member, because, with the tracker, it was sometimes just a huge splash of information—sometimes you got 150 pages with two days to read it all. Local government would be appalled at such practice. I have made that point in the past. I think that focused papers are very useful.

I agree on the point about AI. In fact, I would go a lot further than the convener. This is only my personal point of view, but I think that AI is of such importance that I would be willing to break with the idea that we should have no more commissioners. There is a very good reason why we should not have any more commissioners, but a commissioner for AI is an idea that I would be willing to consider. AI is a huge issue that raises many questions and opportunities, so it would be very useful for us to have an eye on it.

In the previous session of Parliament, we had a big discussion about Historic Environment Scotland. There are a lot of problems with HES, which the Government has tried to respond to, but it is our duty as a committee to give HES further scrutiny to make sure that it is running as it should. There have been huge problems there. It is a vitally important and, I believe, underused resource, so making sure that we keep on top of HES is very important.

Nipping back to AI for a second, the new mandate of the Council of Europe's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities—the congress that I have just been asked to stay on—has already started. It is just the UK that has a later mandate because of the way that local elections worked out. I have a report going to the October meeting, so I am grateful for the committee's support in being able to pursue that. The congress covers AI to a very large extent, not least in relation to disinformation, the protection of minors and so on, and we could usefully learn from some of the stuff that it does.

However, my views are very much coloured by what the committee has discussed before, and I am keen to hear which areas new members think that it would be useful to explore.

09:45

The Convener: Thanks for that. I will reflect on one of the things that you said, which was about the EU legislation tracker. I have had one early conversation with the clerks about how that works. The previous committee's legacy report hinted that taking a different approach to that issue might be a more efficient use of time. I agree that the density of the information that was provided sometimes did not enable the best and most relevant scrutiny. The function of looking at EU legislation that might have an impact is important, but if we are to do that, it must be more focused so that we use our time a little bit more effectively. I would welcome members' views about their expectations of how that should work. If any member wants to explore how we might improve our practice as we progress, that will always be welcome.

Colin Beattie: At this point, I am, like a number of committee members, in a state of trying to understand the information, but one or two things jumped out. It is perhaps a bit dry, but I want to better understand the keeping pace power that expires on 27 March. What are its full implications? There are a lot of ifs and buts, but it could be quite important.

I was going to ask about the UK Government's European partnership bill, but that has clearly been kicked into the long grass, at least for the moment.

The other point that I will mention is the memorandum of understanding on the Sewel convention. It is quite important that we follow up on that and keep an eye on what is happening with it. I am looking at page 10, which says that the Parliament withheld consent on "13 occasions" between 2019 and 2026, whereas consent was withheld on only two occasions between 1999 and 2019. Clearly, there is now more friction or disagreement. A memorandum of understanding that enables both the Scottish and UK Governments to handle Sewel more smoothly would be beneficial.

The last thing that I will touch on is HES. Previously, I was on the Public Audit Committee, on which big questions were posed about the integrity of the ongoing actions and decisions being made by HES. We need to keep an eye on and be cognisant of that issue, because it has not been resolved and could affect so many things. I will have more points later, but that is me for the moment.

Pauline Stafford: I agree with most of what has been said. I feel like we are on the same page on a lot of what has been mentioned on culture. I hope to hear early on in the session from Creative Scotland, because I am interested in the progress that it has made in implementing the independent review's recommendations. It is the main development body and funder in Scotland, so there is a big opportunity to look at the benefits of multiyear funding and how it has been applied.

Convener, you touched on Screen Scotland possibly becoming a distinct organisation. It would be great to hear from Screen Scotland quite early in the session given that film is a growing sector.

I think that quite a few manifestos proposed a culture and arts bill, and one of those parties is now in government. It would be interesting to take evidence on best practice from countries around the world, because such bills are developed in lots of different ways and there are lots of different models. Having some more information on that would be great. A lot of things that came out of the Creative Scotland review were about long-term investment and strategy, where we put investment and to what benefit. Given my background, my interest in that ties into education as well.

There is a whole ecosystem there. In this era of austerity, access to culture is important, and we need to look at whether we are getting that right.

AI and the gaming industry are also areas that we should focus on.

With regard to Europe and external affairs, it is important that we deepen our relations with Europe. Much of the EU tracker work will depend on what approach the UK Government takes and

where we sit in that regard. I am not sure how quickly we will get an idea of which way things are going in that respect from whoever takes over as Prime Minister. That may take a bit more time, but many changes have taken place, especially in relation to devolved Governments, and it will be important for the committee to work out those new relationships.

I am also interested in the Nordic-Baltic strategy, which was last refreshed in 2017. We are in a very different place now when it comes to the periphery of Europe. That was another interesting part of the reading that I did this week.

David Green: I associate myself with some of the convener's opening comments, especially those about the proposed culture bill, which he was right to highlight is on the Government's agenda. It is a wise approach for the sector to be given an opportunity to co-design the bill and to be involved in scrutiny of it.

Likewise, on Screen Scotland and Creative Scotland, I agree with Pauline Stafford that the committee should work to ensure that the Leitch review is delivered in full.

I also agree with the convener's points about broadcasting and, in particular, the impact on STV North, which the Parliament will debate this evening.

On the UK Government's proposed European partnership bill, there is uncertainty about what is happening at Westminster, but the committee should expect that bill to proceed, and we should have a role in scrutinising it, especially given the implications that it might have for the Scottish Parliament and for Scotland as a whole.

I associate myself with what Keith Brown said about AI and the ethical implications of the big impact that it is having on the workplace. We need to look at what that means for our creative sector and those who work in it. We should seek to understand how AI is changing the sector.

I also agree with Keith Brown's points about intergovernmental relations. I recognise what our predecessor committee did in looking under the bonnet. There is a lot more to be done in that regard.

I would like to mention some additional issues that have not been raised thus far. I am eager for the committee to look at the Scottish Government's international development strategy, which is now some 10 years old. The sector is in a significantly different position from the one that it was in 10 years ago, largely because there has been a significant loss of institutional money at UK Government level. The sector is also operating in a context of US aid cuts, which means that it is far smaller and more agile than it once was. Given that the sector is looking at decolonisation and a partnership working approach, it is right that we should seek to ensure that the Scottish Government updates its strategy to reflect where the sector is. We have an opportunity to bring together the members of the sector that we have here in Scotland to look at aspects such as the humanitarian emergency fund so that we can carve a new route that has not previously been taken.

The Convener: I welcome your points about international development. Thank you for raising that.

Jenny Young: I will begin with an observation about how committees in the Parliament work. There is sometimes a risk of them becoming commentators. I am not saying that that is what our predecessor committee did—

The Convener: Heaven forbid!

Jenny Young: In the previous session, I worked for an MSP who was a member of the Finance and Public Administration Committee, which did a really good job in scrutinising and holding to account the Government and other bodies. I think that we should bear that in mind as we do our work.

The first topic on my list was Historic Environment Scotland. I echo the comments that others have made about that. It seems to be a total basket case, to be honest. There is certainly work to be done there. Perhaps we could have an early evidence session at which we could haul in the management of Historic Environment Scotland to hear what they have to say.

As Pauline Stafford mentioned, it would also be worth speaking to Creative Scotland and getting its take on things. In previous budgets, there was a bit of back and forth on Creative Scotland's funding, so there is definitely something to probe there.

I do not think that anyone else has mentioned the national performing companies—Scottish Opera and so on. In the previous session, the Finance and Public Administration Committee invited five of the national performing companies to talk about their funding situation through a budgetary lens. As I am sure that our predecessor committee observed, that uncovered some significant issues with regard to the sustainability of the funding position of those organisations. That might be an issue to put on the radar, especially later in the year, when we come to do our pre-budget scrutiny.

I associate myself with what you said on broadcasting, convener. There is certainly something to be done there. There are cuts not just for STV but now for the BBC as well. That is definitely something to probe.

We definitely agree on something on social media and AI. The only issue on that would be legislative competence—what we can reasonably suggest or recommend.

The culture bill is a bit nebulous, so it is worth probing that, getting the sector involved and getting the cabinet secretary in as well.

On working with counterpart committees in the devolved Parliaments, the Finance and Public Administration Committee did that quite successfully in Wales and Northern Ireland. I am keen to pursue that if we can.

The Convener: Thanks very much. In relation to the national performing companies, I covered the Finance and Public Administration Committee last session, for a brief period—

Jenny Young: So you did, convener.

The Convener: I was in that evidence session, which came just after the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee had taken evidence on the same issue; the committees took slightly different angles. There is a clear expectation that we will have a responsibility to hold the Government to account on that, as well as on some statements that it made around that time, to ensure that it follows through on its commitments.

It is important to recognise the legislative competence point but also not to see it as limiting how we think about the consequences of matters that we cannot legislate on but whose impact on devolved matters the Government needs to understand. It will be a factor to consider, but it should not inhibit us from discussing the issue.

Thank you all very much for those initial reflections. As I said, this is by no means the last opportunity to shape the work programme. It will not be set in stone as a result of today's conversation. There will be significant further opportunities to discuss.

Before we move into private session, I invite members to agree that we should organise a business planning day later in the summer recess. Many committees try to do that toward the end of the recess, as members prepare to return to parliamentary business. Can we agree to that today?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: Excellent. Thank you very much. I will work with the clerks in developing that. Obviously, my door and that of the clerks will always be open, and any member should feel free to get in touch with us. We will try to maintain a good dialogue with you all about that work planning day, but is the committee willing to delegate its final development and the detailed programme to me, as convener, in consultation with the clerks?

Members *indicated agreement*.

The Convener: Thank you.

We will move into private session for the last part of our discussion.

09:58

Meeting continued in private until 10:09.

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