

**CONSTITUTION, EUROPE, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS AND CULTURE COMMITTEE**

**11<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 2023, Session 6**

**30 March 2023**

**Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers**

1. The Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers rotates between the five Nordic member countries and is held for a period of one calendar year. During 2023, Iceland holds the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers.
2. At this meeting, the Committee will take evidence from—
  - Sturla Sigurjónsson, Ambassador of Iceland to the United Kingdom.
3. A SPICe briefing on the Icelandic Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers is attached at **Annexe A**.

**CEEAC Committee Clerks  
March 2023**

**SPICe**

**The Information Centre**  
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

# **Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture Committee**

**11<sup>th</sup> Meeting, 2023 (Session 6), Thursday, 30 March**

## **The Icelandic Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers**

### **Introduction**

The Nordic Council of Ministers provides the forum for intergovernmental cooperation amongst the five Nordic countries – Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.

Whilst Greenland and the Faroe Islands remain part of Denmark when it comes to the conduct of foreign affairs, their devolved governments participate in Council of Ministers work. This means [they now have](#) “greater representation and stronger positions in the Nordic Council of Ministers and now enjoy practically the same representation as the other members”.

Members of the Nordic Council of Ministers are a mixture of EU Member States and EEA Members (Norway and Iceland) who participate in the EU Single Market.

Whilst part of the same structure of Nordic cooperation, the Nordic Council of Ministers is distinct from the [Nordic Council which is the official body for formal inter-parliamentary co-operation](#) across the region.

The Nordic Council of Ministers consists of a number of different groups. The key groups are the Ministers for Nordic Co-operation (MR-SAM) which holds the responsibility for directing Nordic intergovernmental cooperation and the Nordic Committee for Co-operation (NSK), which is made up of officials who co-ordinate the day-to-day work of Nordic intergovernmental cooperation.

There are currently a number of ministerial councils as well as the Ministers for Nordic Co-operation group.

The Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers rotates between the five Nordic member countries and is held for a period of one calendar year. During 2023, Iceland holds the Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

Today's evidence session is an opportunity for the Committee to discuss the Icelandic priorities for its Presidency with the Icelandic Ambassador to the UK.

### **The role of the Presidency**

The rotating presidency is responsible for taking forward the work of the Nordic Council of Ministers. This approach is supported by the development of a Programme for the Presidency which outlines the political priorities for inter-governmental co-operation during the year. This briefing is informed by the Icelandic Presidency's priorities.

The country which holds the Presidency in the Nordic Council of Ministers also holds the chair for the Nordic Prime Ministers' meetings throughout the year. The same applies for the meetings of the foreign ministers and the ministers of defence. These ministerial meetings always take place outside of the formal Nordic co-operation. The Nordic meetings of senior officials are also chaired by the country presently holding the Presidency.

### **The Icelandic Presidency of the Nordic Council of Ministers**

#### Vision 2030

Collectively the Nordic Council's governments have committed to "[the Nordic region becoming the most sustainable and integrated region in the world by 2030](#)". The work of the Nordic Council of Ministers is directed to achieving this aim.

#### Overview of the Presidency

The headline for the Icelandic Presidency is "[The Nordic Region – A Force for Peace](#)". Iceland's Presidency will focus on three priority areas:

- A green Nordic region.
- A competitive Nordic region.
- A socially sustainable Nordic Region.

These three priorities are also the areas identified in the Nordic Council's Vision 2030. The Presidency is also taking place against the backdrop of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, which is clearly of concern to all Nordic countries. The invasion has already led to both Sweden and Finland seeking membership of NATO, where they will join their other Nordic Council partners who are already members.

The Icelandic Presidency has also prioritised progressing a "just green transition" during 2023. [Other priorities](#) for the Presidency are:

- The sustainable utilisation of marine resources.
- Gender equality and rights, especially for transgender and intersex people.
- Equal opportunities for participation in the labour market.

- Strengthening and development of the Nordic culture and arts scene.
- Joint Nordic policy for digital language technology.
- Strengthened West Nordic co-operation during the presidency.

#### How will these priorities be implemented?

Unlike the European Union, the Nordic Council does not have a legislation making body or any way of enforcing agreements. As a result, these policy priorities will be pursued by joint agreement between governments and sharing of best practice across the Nordic region.

The next section of the briefing examines the priorities under each of the Presidency's three priority areas.

#### A green Nordic region

In this area, the Icelandic Presidency will focus on measures in the following policy areas:

- Environment
- Equality
- Maritime
- Energy
- Sustainability.

Some key highlights under the environment and equality policy areas are promoting Nordic cooperation to make progress on climate change adaptation and taking advantage of the job opportunities created by the green transition. The Presidency will also consider sustainable solutions in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and direct attention to the Nordic Region's opportunities regarding the capture and permanent storage of carbon.

The Presidency will seek to make progress to develop the region's green energy potential and will also seek to promote sustainable development and circular economy policies across the Nordic region.

#### A competitive Nordic region

In this area, the Icelandic Presidency will focus on measures in the following policy areas:

- Social development
- Labour market
- Digitalisation
- Culture.

Some key highlights under this priority include the promotion of green growth and the use of new methods and technology to promote the participation of young people in the Nordic Region in public debate.

In the area of employment, the Presidency will promote study of the effects pandemics have on the labour market and examine how the Nordic region can support “a healthy and sustainable working environment for everyone's benefit throughout their working lives, in order to maintain the wealth of experience that exists within the workforce”. The Presidency will also “place a special focus on the needs of immigrants and people with disabilities and how to facilitate their inclusion in the labour market”.

To promote closer working and integration across the Nordic region, the Presidency will focus on digital solutions and “common recognition of professional qualifications and improved tax regulations between the countries in order to enable people to study, work and run companies in countries other than their own”.

### A socially sustainable Nordic region

In this area, the Icelandic Presidency will focus on measures in the following policy areas:

- Health
- Rights
- Innovation.

Focusing on health, some of the key priorities for the Presidency include a focus on improved public and mental health, particularly for children and young people, embracing the digital transformation to support healthcare, encouraging innovation in health and welfare matters and protection against antimicrobial resistance.

The Presidency will continue promoting a healthy and safe working environment by identifying future challenges in occupational health and safety. The Presidency will also continue to place an emphasis on the fight against human trafficking across the Nordic region. In addition, the Presidency will continue to encourage a focus on implementing the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child across the Nordic region and will “focus on the importance that central and local governments within the Nordic Region join hands in working together on child-friendly societies”.

Under the innovation policy, the Presidency will seek to further develop the Nordic region's reputation at the forefront of innovation and implementation of technological solutions. There will be a particular focus on ensuring electronic solutions are accessible to disabled persons on the same basis as able bodied persons. There will also be a focus on integrating social and healthcare services, in particular for elderly persons.

### **Scottish Government interaction with the Nordic Region**

In August 2022, the [Scottish Government opened](#) its Nordic Office in Copenhagen. The Scottish Government has [prioritised improved links](#) with the Nordic region because:

“Scotland has strong shared interests with the Nordics on culture, environment, energy, climate change, digital economies, wellbeing and social services, and preservation and opportunities in the Arctic region.”

According to the Scottish Government:

“The Nordic office aims to improve these connections, helping to connect business, cultural organisations and academia, as well as connecting politically. In this way, we won’t only strengthen diplomatic links, but ties between people, culture and economies, helping to make Scotland a natural part of the European family.”

In September 2017, the Scottish Government updated its [Nordic-Baltic policy statement](#). The document makes no reference to the Nordic Council of Ministers and the Scottish Government has not indicated it has plans to seek to work directly with the Nordic Council of Ministers, nor is it clear whether this would be possible. However, the policy statement does set out an ambition to “work on cross-border and multi-countries initiatives with partners” across the Nordic-Baltic region.

### **Scottish Parliament engagement with the Nordic region**

As referred to earlier, the Nordic Council of Ministers is distinct from the [Nordic Council which is the official body for formal inter-parliamentary co-operation](#) across the region. The Scottish Parliament has sought to increase its engagement with the Nordic Council over recent years at both parliamentary and official level.

There was strong cooperation at COP26, where the Scottish Parliament and Nordic Council jointly hosted an event in the Blue Zone of COP 26.

More recently, from 31 October to 3 November 2022, [a Scottish Parliament delegation, led by the Presiding Officer attended the 74th session of the Nordic Council in Helsinki](#). The Convener of the Constitution, Europe, External Affairs and Culture was also part of the delegation. The primary purpose of the visit to Helsinki was to attend the Nordic Council session and meet with representatives, including Speakers from a number of the parliaments within the Nordic Region.

According to the report of the visit, attendance:

“has allowed the Scottish Parliament to indicate its desire to further strengthen its friendship and links with the Nordic Council and Nordic Parliaments and find further opportunities to share knowledge and experiences of core parliamentary issues at both a political and official level.”

### **Issues for discussion during today’s evidence session**

This morning’s session is an opportunity to discuss how the Nordic Council of Ministers pursues common policy objectives and how those objectives are then translated into action across the Nordic region.

In addition, given that some members are EU Member States, and some aren’t, how that affects the work of the Nordic Council of Ministers.

It is also an opportunity to discuss how the Nordic Council of Ministers works with other states and sub-states in the region.

Finally, the Committee may wish to discuss with the Icelandic Ambassador how the Nordic Council of Ministers works with the Nordic Council (the legislative arm for Nordic cooperation).

**Iain McIver**  
**SPICe Research**

Note: Committee briefing papers are provided by SPICe for the use of Scottish Parliament committees and clerking staff. They provide focused information or respond to specific questions or areas of interest to committees and are not intended to offer comprehensive coverage of a subject area.

The Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh, EH99 1SP [www.parliament.scot](http://www.parliament.scot)