

Press release
Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (COSLA)

COSLA European Spokesperson: *“Local Government is changing at an unprecedented rate in Scotland and the rest of Europe”*

Scottish Councillor leads report overseeing the transformation of local governance in 35 European countries

On 21st October Cllr Harry McGuigan - COSLA Communities Spokesperson and Scottish Local Government representative in the Council of Europe’s Congress of Local and Regional Authorities (Europe’s largest official assembly of devolved and local elected members) voted on a wide ranging assessment of the changes in local governance (decentralisation, centralisation, performance management, shared services, community participation) covering 35 of the 47 Member States of the Council of Europe.

This is the largest political assessment ever done on the state of local democracy in Europe and its recommendations were agreed by a large majority in the Plenary Session of the Congress (a body whose main purpose is that of official watchdog of local democracy in Europe) held today in Strasbourg.

Commenting the main findings of the report Cllr McGuigan said:

“The overall picture of local governance is a mixture of hope and worrying signs: in many European countries local government is facing an unprecedented threat – indeed the current crisis has accelerated a long term trend. There has been a further centralisation of local powers and an increasing move to amalgamating local authorities; in other places this has taken the shape in terms of greater direction being exercised from the centre”

The study found amalgamation of local authorities in places such as Greece, Finland and Wales. Greater controls from the centre have developed in Lithuania, Serbia, Bulgaria and Spain

However according to Cllr McGuigan the patten wasn’t entirely pessimistic and uniform:
“Scotland, alongside places such as the Netherlands Switzerland and France, makes abundant use of partnership agreements between the national and local authorities to achieve common goals. In some other cases it is municipalities themselves that team up to jointly provide public services such as, for instance, in Italy, Germany, Belgium, Sweden and France”

One of the reasons for the report being carried out by Cllr McGuigan, with the support from officers from COSLA and the Improvement Service, was to describe and compare the unique Scottish arrangements in local governance (including Community Planning and Single Outcome Agreements) with those of other European countries. He said:

“Performance management, including outcome-based agreements are particularly prevalent in Scotland but they can also be found in Finland, Norway, Denmark and to a certain extent Austria, Portugal and Spain.

“There are also very different examples of citizen participation across Europe. These cover community involvement, co-determination (or co-production) of public services and participatory budgeting. The study found that community involvement is greatly helped if

Local Authorities are small in size, such as in Hungary or Turkey, but this is threatened with increased centralisation and amalgamation of councils as a result of the crisis”

The study found that these innovations in engagement can have positive consequences - such as making public decisions more measurable, increase participation and scrutiny, better prevent and react to increased demand for public services and in some cases provide pressure to prevent the outright centralisation of powers. On the other hand, unless properly managed, some of the transformations have been shown to have negative consequences for local self-governance: they can be used as a way of reducing the autonomy of elected members, focus excessively on management to the detriment of policymaking, and give excessive influence to non-elected and less accountable interest groups.

Scottish Cllr Mairi Evans attended the final vote on behalf of Cllr McGuigan. She summed up the main conclusions:

“Changes in local government across Europe are so diverse that ‘one size fits all’ solutions would not work. However, there are many things that the Council of Europe’s Congress, and indeed all of its members, can do to improve the state of local democracy across Europe. The Recommendations thus call for more exchanges of best practices across Member States, to introduce new guidelines that can reinforce the status of local government and its public accountability and public participation.”

The Congress also invited as speaker Cllr Anne Marie Jorritsma, President of VNG the Dutch sister organisation of COSLA, and of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), COSLA's European umbrella organisation. In her speech Cllr Jorritsma said: *"changes of local governance are welcome if they improve citizens wellbeing and provided that local democratic accountability is ensured. Neither should they be used as a tool to reduce local atonomy"*

The report was voted after a large majority and will now be sent to the Council of Ministers, made up by the Foreign Ministers of all Council of Europe Member States including the UK.

BACKGROUND

The Council of Europe is Europe’s largest international body, bringing together 47 Member States. It is much larger than the 27 Member States of the EU as it also includes Russia and most of the former Soviet republics, Turkey, the Balkan countries and the Nordic non-EU members such as Iceland or Norway. It was founded in in 1949 (under the leadership of the UK) as a body to promote peace in Europe after WWII.

The Congress of Local and Regional Authorities brings together members of devolved parliaments and local councillors from the 47 Member States of Congress. They are unpaid officials whose main remit is to act as official watchdogs of local democracy including the monitoring of local elections and to oversee that Member States apply the European Charter of Local Self Government, an international treaty signed by all Congress Member States including the UK. COSLA nominates and supports two Councillors that represent Scottish Local Government in this body, alongside two representatives from the Scottish Parliament. The Congress budget covers the transport and accommodation costs of the members as they attend meetings in Strasbourg between one and three times a year.