

Leaders Item 04

**Local Authority Work to Tackle Depopulation**

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| **Summary and Recommendations**  Drawing on recent depopulation work undertaken by west coast councils, this paper will explore how COSLA’s Migration, Population and Diversity team can support local authorities to develop strategies to address their demographic challenges using migration as a potential lever for growth.  This paper invites Leaders to:   1. Agree to COSLA’s proposed next steps for supporting councils to address their demographic challenges; and 2. Agree that COSLA will continue to lobby the UK Government for an immigration system that recognises Scotland’s needs. |

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| **References**  Previous reports on depopulation  None |

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# Purpose

1. Drawing on recent depopulation work undertaken by west coast councils, this paper will explore how COSLA’s Migration, Population and Diversity team can support local authorities to develop strategies to address their demographic challenges using migration as a potential lever for growth.

# West Coast of Scotland Depopulation Concerns

1. While Scotland’s population is growing, this growth is uneven across our communities. Indeed, around a third of Scotland’s council areas (11 out of 32 councils), are expected to experience population decline in the next 25 years. West coast councils are disproportionately affected by depopulation, and projections show that this situation is expected to worsen. As such, the Leaders and Chief Executives of eight west coast councils (Argyll and Bute, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar, Dumfries and Galloway, East Ayrshire, Inverclyde, North Ayrshire, South Ayrshire and West Dunbartonshire) are working together to look at ways to counteract this worrying trend of depopulation in their areas.
2. West coast Council Leaders have written to the Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution, Derek Mackay, and the Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government, Aileen Campbell, to outline the projected social and economic impact of depopulation on the west coast of Scotland, and by implication on the country as a whole. The letter asks for a commitment from Scottish Government to work with west coast councils to secure long-term and sustainable change on this issue.
3. The west coast councils have produced a discussion paper and will be developing local press briefings in order to start a conversation on the types of initiatives which could address their concerns. One of the recommendations is the development of regional immigration policies through the Brexit process, which this Leaders paper focuses on. There is, however, the potential to expand this work, and draw in colleagues from other teams within COSLA, should support be required in relation to the broader initiatives that the west coast councils have highlighted.

# Current UK Government Position

1. The UK Government commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) to report on the current and likely future patterns of EEA migration and the impacts that migration will have. [MAC’s final report and recommendations](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/741926/Final_EEA_report.PDF) for the UK’s post-Brexit immigration system were published in September 2018. Key points are:

* The UK should focus on enabling higher-skilled migration, coupled with a more restrictive policy on lower-skilled migration, in the design of its post-Brexit system.
* There should be no preference for EU citizens.
* There should be no low-skilled work route, with the possible exception of a seasonal agricultural workers scheme.
* There should be no regional variation in salary thresholds.

1. In terms of Scotland, MAC has suggested a specific immigration system is not justified in terms of demographic or economic differences. According to MAC, “migration is much less effective at dealing with a rising old age dependency ration than increases in the pension age and immigration may not be an effective strategy for sustaining remote communities unless reasons for locals leaving are addressed. Overall, we were not of the view that Scotland’s economic situation is sufficiently different from the rest of the UK to justify a very different migration policy”.
2. UK Government was expected to publish a white paper detailing how the post-Brexit immigration system will work before the end of 2018, ahead of the publication of an Immigration Bill in Spring 2019. We still await further details in relation to this, but expect that the MAC recommendations will form the basis of what is proposed. Indeed, in a recent meeting attended by a COSLA representative, the Secretary of State for Scotland made clear that he did not favour a specific immigration system for Scotland.

# COSLA Position

1. We are very concerned that the MAC recommendations do not recognise the demographic challenges that Scotland faces. [Scotland is differentially dependent on migration to other parts of the UK](https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/files/statistics/nrs-visual/mid-17-pop-est/mid-year-pop-est-17-info.pdf) and, as such, we support the need for a flexible immigration system that considers local requirements. However, if the MAC recommendations are implemented, we believe that they could exacerbate the problems that already exist in terms of the difficulties that exist to encourage inward migration to Scotland.
2. Scotland has benefited from the freedom of movement of workers and we have argued that its continuation would be the most advantageous system for Scotland. However, in the absence of that, our priority is that a future immigration policy enables Local Government and employers to attract and retain migrant workers, particularly in key sectors where we are facing skills gaps and shortages. Our immigration system should also give us the ability to encourage inward migration and incentivise young people to work and settle within areas of Scotland where local populations are facing the sharpest decline.
3. We cannot forecast what immigration system will be put in place post-Brexit but we want to be involved in its development. Crucially, if the current immigration system, the Points Based System (PBS), is extended to EU/EEA countries, then current issues with it will need to be recognised. COSLA has long voiced concerns about a system in which the aim is to reduce net migration and the bar is consistently raised to the exclusion of particular jobs and sectors (e.g. the care sector) – Scotland needs low-skilled as well as highly-skilled migration.

# Next Steps

1. As stated above, the west coast councils have written to Scottish Government Ministers in order to start a conversation on the types of initiatives which could address their concerns. COSLA can look to support these discussions if that would be helpful, and can also provide a supportive role in discussions with the UK Government. While it is recognised that the west coast of Scotland has particular challenges which will require bespoke solutions, COSLA will continue to lobby on behalf of all councils in terms of addressing the country’s broad demographic challenges. In many cases, solutions identified for the west coast could be applicable in other parts of the country and COSLA would welcome ongoing discussion as to the role that we should be playing in identifying these and lobbying for their introduction where that is appropriate.
2. These discussions can also inform the approach that COSLA takes in our lobbying of UK Government for an immigration system that recognises Scotland’s needs. We have a long-standing history of responding to UK Government and MAC consultations in this regard and, while we have had little success in influencing them to date, it is important that the case continues to be made for an immigration system which meets our needs.
3. We have worked with National Records of Scotland (NRS) on bespoke areas of work on migration and demographics and can ask for their assistance in this work too. NRS has recently produced [online council area profiles](https://www.nrscotland.gov.uk/statistics-and-data/statistics/stats-at-a-glance/council-area-profiles). The online tools provide a summary of demographic trends for each Scottish council area and offer comparisons with other council areas and Scotland as a whole. They provide access to NRS data in one place and give an opportunity to explore how local council areas are changing and see which council areas have similar trends.

1. There are two main academic reports that have been published recently that provide an analysis of what a flexible immigration system could look like in Scotland. [‘Scottish and UK Immigration Policy after Brexit: Evaluating options for a different approach’](https://www.scer.scot/wp-content/uploads/SCER-Policy-Note-2.pdf) by Christina Boswell, Sarah Kyambi and Saskia Smellie, sets out a range of options for a ‘differentiated’ approach to immigration. Eve Hepburn’s report [‘Options for Differentiating the UK’s Immigration System’](http://www.parliament.scot/S5_European/General%20Documents/CTEER_Dr_Hepburn_report_2017.04.24.pdf), scrutinises proposals for devolving immigration policy in the UK by exploring opportunities, challenges and consequences of pursuing different immigration models for post-Brexit Britain.
2. Both academic reports provide clear examples of flexible regional immigration systems that work in other parts of the world and have strong retention requirements. These examples are clear counterarguments to the UK Government’s reticence and concern that a regional immigration model would result in subsequent movement to the pressure points in the south of England.
3. We can continue to work with academic colleagues (including from Edinburgh University, Glasgow University and Oxford COMPAS) to explore the potential for implementing soft and mid-range levers to encourage people to live, work, study in areas of Scotland. We are also happy to host a meeting with the key local authority officers, academics, NRS and other relevant stakeholders to look at how we can take this work forward. This could potentially dovetail with discussions we are looking to facilitate through the newly established Strategic Migration Partnership Board, chaired by COSLA Community Wellbeing Spokesperson, and involving senior officers from key partners across the public sector in Scotland.
4. In terms of our wider work, we are working with the Home Office on the proposed EU Settlement Scheme and on how we can ensure EU citizens living in Scotland secure settled status ([COSLA EU Settlement Scheme Paper](http://www.cosla.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/18-08-31_item_10_eu_settlement_scheme.pdf)). As part of Scottish Local Government’s preparedness work, we are also working on a workforce survey to help us better understand the impact of Brexit on our current workforce. This will be a vital element of our ongoing work to gain a better understanding of our migrant population and our migration needs post-Brexit.
5. Leaders are invited to:
6. Agree to COSLA’s proposed next steps for supporting councils to address their demographic challenges; and,
7. Agree that COSLA will continue to lobby the UK Government for an immigration system that recognises Scotland’s needs.

**November 2018**