



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

**Report of the Visit by the Scottish Parliament Delegation to
the Althing and Arctic Circle Assembly
Reykjavik, Iceland**

18 – 21 October 2023

Introduction

1. This is the report of the visit by the Scottish Parliament delegation to Reykjavik, Iceland from 18 to 21 October 2023 for bilateral discussions in the Parliament of Iceland (Althing) and participation in the annual Arctic Circle Assembly. The delegation comprised of:
 - Monica Lennon MSP, Member of the Net Zero, Energy and Transport (NZET) Committee; and
 - Mark Ruskell MSP, Member of the NZET Committee

The delegation was accompanied and supported by Pater McGrath, Clerk to the NZET Committee, and Steven Bell from the International Relations Office

2. The purpose of the visit was threefold: to discuss with members of the Althing's Environment and Communications (EC) Committee policy issues which fall under the mutual remits of both the EC and NZET Committees; to attend the annual Arctic Circle Assembly; and to further strengthen the friendship between both parliaments.
3. As with all International Relations Office outward visits, it sought to meet the aims of the Scottish Parliament's [International Strategy](#), namely:
 - to promote the Scottish Parliament, its practices and processes as an open, accessible and participative legislature amongst other parliaments and international organisations;
 - to develop the Scottish Parliament's reputation, skills, knowledge and abilities, through this work and its relations with other legislatures and organisations, to represent the people of Scotland in holding the Scottish Government and public bodies to account;
 - to enhance the Scottish Parliament's institutional and international reputation through meetings with other parliamentarians and policy makers; and
 - to support and promote, through the Scottish Parliament's participation, activities which could bring wider economic benefit and added value to Scotland.
4. The delegation wishes to put on record their sincere thanks to all those who gave up their time to meet with them. They would particularly like thank members of the Althing's Environment and Communications Committee; the Chairman of the Arctic Circle Assembly and former President of Iceland, His Excellency Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, as well as all Ministers and Members of Nordic Parliaments who met with them. Special thanks is extended to the Althing's Environment and Communications Committee members Ingibjörg Isaksen MP and Njáll Trausti Friðbertsson MP for participating in the joint- breakout session at the Arctic Circle Assembly, a first for the Scottish Parliament.

Background

5. The annual Arctic Circle Assembly is the largest annual international gathering on the Arctic, attended by more than 2,000 participants including Heads of State and Governments, Ministers, Members of Parliaments, officials, scientists, business leaders, activists, NGO's, academics, and others from over 60 countries.
6. The topics of focus include climate change and its effects on the Arctic region, sea melt and extreme weather, energy security and sustainable development in the Arctic, fisheries and ecosystem management, energy security, indigenous rights, shipping and transportation infrastructure, Arctic resources, and tourism.
7. The stated mission of the Arctic Circle is *"to facilitate dialogue and build relationships to address rapid changes in the Arctic"* and *"strengthen the decision-making process by bringing together as many international partners as possible to interact under one large 'open tent'"*.
8. The organisation was established in response to issues facing the Arctic as a result of climate change as well as the growing international interest in the region. With the opening of shipping lanes and other economic activity in the Arctic, the region *"is moving to centre stage and is playing a significant role in issues such as globalisation, economic development, energy exploration, environmental protection and international security."*
9. The Chairman of the Arctic Circle and former President of Iceland, H.E. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson, visited the Scottish Parliament in 2017 and 2018. During these visits he discussed the work and role of the Arctic Circle Assembly with former Presiding Officer Ken Macintosh and encouraged MSP participation.
10. The Scottish Parliament's initial involvement in the Arctic Circle Assembly took place in 2018 and was a result of an invitation extended by President Grímsson at his meeting with the (then) Presiding Officer. The Parliament's inaugural attendance at the Assembly involved the former Convener of the Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform (ECCLR) Committee, Gillian Martin MSP, plus committee colleague, Mark Ruskell MSP. The 2018 Assembly was seen as a pilot, scoping exercise for the Parliament. Feedback received from participants post-Assembly was extremely positive and, as a result, a second parliamentary delegation took part in 2019, once again led by the former ECCLR Convener, Gillian Martin MSP. The Convener was joined in 2019 by the former ECCLR Deputy Convener, Finlay Carson MSP.
11. Building on the inaugural visit, the 2019 parliamentary delegation was accompanied by a SPICe environment and climate change subject specialist as well as Professor Elisa Morgera, Global Environment Law and Co-Director, Strathclyde Centre for Environmental Law and Governance, University of Strathclyde. The delegation delivered a breakout session entitled, *"A Scottish Perspective on Climate Change,*

Climate Justice and Human Rights”, the first such session delivered by representatives of the Scottish Parliament.

12. Involvement in the annual Assembly was suspended in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID pandemic and associated travel restrictions. This hiatus resulted in a break in momentum with the Parliament’s involvement at the Assembly. The participation of the Deputy Presiding Officer at last year’s Assembly (2022), the first of the new Session and the first at Presiding Officer level, signalled the Scottish Parliament’s commitment to engagement with the Arctic Circle Assembly and the wider Nordic region.
13. The Parliament led a breakout session at the 2023 Assembly entitled, *“Net Zero and Nature: Views from Parliamentarians from Scotland and the Nordic Region on the challenges of meeting wind energy and biodiversity ambitions.”* Whilst a presentation was delivered by the NZET’s predecessor committee in 2019, this was the first time a breakout session was delivered by MSPs and members of another Parliament – the Althing. Further details of this presentation are described below.

Programme

14. Over the course of three full days at the Arctic Circle Assembly and one day at the Parliament of Iceland (Althing), the delegation delivered one breakout session and held five bilateral meetings, including with members of the Althing Standing Committee on the Environment and Communication; the Chairman of the Arctic Circle Assembly and former President of Iceland, H.E. Mr Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson; Iceland’s Minister of the Environment, Energy and Climate, Mr Gudlaugur Thór Thórdarson MP; Ms. Aaja Chemnitz MP (Denmark), Chair of the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians in the Arctic Region; and Ms Jojo Mehta, Chair, Stop Ecocide Foundation.
15. In addition to the above mentioned five bilateral meetings the delegation also attended four plenary sessions and a total of ten breakout sessions on a variety of policy areas linked to the NZET Committee’s remit including, but not limited to, tidal energy, wind energy and energy security. The delegation also attended, a first for a Scottish Parliament delegation, a closed roundtable meeting on the subject of ‘clean energy’ chaired by Iceland’s Minister for the Environment, Energy and Climate, Gudlaugur Thór Thórdarson MP.
16. Three evening networking events hosted by the Prime Minister & Foreign Minister of Iceland; the British Ambassador to Iceland, Dr Bryony Mathew, and the Arctic Circle Assembly conference organisers made up the remainder of the delegation’s formal programme of meetings and events.
17. Prior to the commencement of the Arctic Circle Assembly, NZET Committee member, Mark Ruskell MSP, and NZET Committee Clerk, Peter McGrath, also took part in a habitat restoration site visit as guests of Fuglavernd (Iceland’s member of Birdlife

International) to view peatland and riparian restoration projects at two west-coast sites north of Reykjavik: the Grunnaþfjörður tidal lagoon and Hvanneyri estuarine meadows. Some of the findings and learning points from these site visits are listed below. To note that this is a summary of views expressed by Icelandic participants of this site visit and not the view of the NZET Committee or Scottish Parliament.

Habitat Restoration Site Visit

18. Iceland's lowlands are a similar biome to Scotland's northern highlands and islands: boreal forest (mainly birch) and peat bog. It is a damaged environment with Iceland losing almost all forest cover, and with it much of its best soil, shortly after settlement. It is estimated that over 300,000 hectares of peatland are degraded. Iceland's policymakers have for many years recognised that improving Iceland's environment and soil is a national priority but have acknowledged that mistakes have been made.
19. The current work involves undoing generations of agricultural "improvement" to drain the bogs. It was noted that until quite recently, financial support for drainage had been government-provided. This work mainly involves filling in ditches to re-wet the peat. This brings long-term benefits for both biodiversity gain and carbon sequestration. Although not a member of the EU, Iceland has been able to secure EU LIFE co-funding for this work, which has eight partners: national and local government and NGOs. The RSPB mentors Fuglavernd, which is a small organisation, as a partner in this work and RSPB representatives were also guests on the visit.
20. Both sites contain good agricultural land (by Icelandic standards) and several farms. They are internationally important for waterfowl and waders like godwit, redshank, dunlin, and lesser white-fronted and brent goose. Many of the birds found here will also spend part of their year in the UK. This is one reason why RSPB have chosen to be involved. Having a healthy population of these species is also good for two nationally iconic but threatened raptor species: gyrfalcon and white-tailed eagle.
21. It was noted during these visits to Grunnaþfjörður and Hvanneyri that the work there, and elsewhere in Iceland, starts with building and maintaining partnerships including with different branches of government, municipalities, farmers, landowners, and local industry. The delegation was informed that trust between these partners is crucial.
22. It was further noted that the re-wetting of bogs is good for salmon rivers as it helps them maintain a more stable water level. People come to Iceland for game fishing, and salmon permits are lucrative, so this one way to make that appeal to the self-interest of landowners and other stakeholders. Another might be to encourage bird-watching tourism which Fuglavernd agreed is an under-exploited sector with potential for growth.
23. Restoration work needs to be multidisciplinary. Peat restoration is a young discipline and experts in other fields can provide insights that avoid mistakes or at least help to

learn from them. An example is knowing the right time to drain ditches and not draining too many at once. This can impact negatively on some local fish and bird populations. Finding enough skilled people to do the job, and at the right time in the year, is one of the major challenges.

24. Iceland has strong local government even though some municipalities are only a few hundred people which can be problematic. A local industry may have disproportionate and negative influence and can lean on local representatives to make decisions that are against longer-term national goals.
25. There is a strong forestry lobby in Iceland. Many people think planting trees is a social and environmental good. Fuglavernd say it is more complex than that. You need the right trees in the right place, and natural regeneration when possible.
26. The biggest sectoral emitter in Iceland is agriculture and land use. There was a view that Iceland had not yet had a proper national conversation about what reaching net zero by 2040 would mean for Icelandic farming, particularly for grazing livestock numbers. Farming in Iceland is generally uneconomic and dependent on subsidy but there is a national consensus that having thriving farming communities is a social good and should be supported.
27. The International Relations Office wishes to thank Fuglavernd staff for including this learning and professional development opportunity for the NZET Committee member and Clerk.

Bilateral discussions

28. The NZET Committee members first bilateral meeting was with the Althing's Environment and Communications (EC) Committee to discuss the policy challenges of achieving net zero in both Scotland and Iceland. This meeting followed on from earlier discussions as part of the EC Committee's visit to Holyrood in January 2023, and a previous bilateral held in the Althing in October 2022. The following is a summary of the most recent discussions.
29. Over 85% of Iceland's energy used is green but almost none of it comes from wind. Geothermal, followed by hydro, are Iceland's two main sources of energy. The delegation was informed that this is a key moment in Iceland's discussion on wind energy. A pilot project involving two wind turbines has gone well and a government bill is awaited although it has been delayed. The bill, if enacted, is expected to enable the expansion of the onshore sector but the detail of how this is to be achieved is still being discussed and to be determined.
30. Most Members of the EC Committee appeared to agree that expanding the onshore wind sector was a social good and perhaps necessary for Iceland. One Member said

that, whenever possible, wind turbines should be out of sight and, given this viewpoint, queried whether Scotland was the best example for Iceland to follow.

31. There was a view that one of the main points of expanding the wind sector should be to decarbonise heavy industry and avoid Iceland being a bad example of a rich country “offshoring” its most hard to decarbonise sectors.
32. Municipalities’ significant power as local decision-takers was again raised. Some saw this as a practical barrier to moving decisively on wind power. There were views expressed that “community benefit” from third-party industry could be misused. Money flowing into small municipalities can potentially distort decision-making and set up clashes between national and local interests.
33. Iceland has pledged to be carbon-neutral by 2040. Opposition Members suggested the government had been complacent and was not moving fast enough, with an outdated delivery plan dating from 2018. They said that Iceland was set to miss upcoming interim targets in the 2030s.
34. Policymakers and experts in Iceland are having the same conversation as in Scotland about how quickly green hydrogen can ‘scale up’ to become an everyday domestic fuel or fuel for export. One member on the panel suggested this was currently “pie in the sky” thinking.
35. Two of the EC Committee Members, Ingibjörg Isaksen MP and Njáll Trausti Friðbertsson MP, went on to take part in the Scottish Parliament breakout session titled, “Net Zero and Nature: Views from Parliamentarians from Scotland and the Nordic Region on the challenges of meeting wind energy and biodiversity ambitions” and their views are set out below.
- 36. NZET Committee members and their EC Committee counterparts welcomed the strong working relationship already established and wished to see this continue in the years ahead. It is recommended that further co-operation to continue through in-person or online meetings, with committee clerks keeping channels of communication open, offering assistance and advice to their counterparts, where required. An open invitation to committee members to visit Holyrood to continue discussions was also extended.**
- 37. Given the strong partnership established this Session between the NZET Committee EC Committee, it is recommended IRO explore a further bilateral meeting between members of these committees as part of any future Scottish Parliament participation in the Arctic Circle Assembly and/or visits to Reykjavik.**



(Photo: NZET Committee members, Monica Lennon MSP and Mark Ruskell MSP, held bilateral discussions with members of the Environment and Communications Committee in the Althing)

38. The delegation also met with Jojo Mehta, CEO of Stop Ecocide International. Stop Ecocide International is an advocacy organisation campaigning to criminalise “the worst crimes of nature”. Ecocide is a young body of law, lying mainly in the sphere of administrative or regulatory rather than criminal sphere of law.
39. Ms Mehta stated that she saw a growing momentum across the world to recognise ecocide as a crime. This includes moves to agree a definition at an international level. She mentioned that *“it is clear that ecocide is on the EU’s agenda as it is being discussed with growing frequency within the EU institutions, including in relation to current proposed environmental legislation”*. It was further noted that it was recently discussed in the House of Lords and that a closed-door meeting about the issue of ecocide was recently held at the UN.
40. Ms Mehta noted that although international discussion, and even international agreements, on ecocide are welcome, the real difference will come when it is enforceable in domestic law because *“only then will it really bite”*. The International Criminal Court is usually a court of last, not first, resort. Domestic criminal law is “cheap and quick” compared to other approaches.
41. The aim of an ecocide law is, according to Ms Mehta, to be a deterrent effect, not lots of court cases. It should be a serious crime (i.e., perhaps of eight years or more for a conviction). Reflecting this, any definition of ecocide must set the bar fairly high: it would be along the lines of deliberately causing serious or lasting harm to a species or ecosystem. An obvious example is serious pollution but conceivably an infrastructure project that causes serious environmental damage could also be included.
42. Ms Mehta acknowledged the issue of where legal liability should rest in cases where the alleged ecocide arose from a legally permitted act. She had doubts about criminal liability for inaction or negligent working (for instance against an environmental

regulator) as the criminal law tends to require a positive act. On the other hand, “*we didn’t realise*” is rarely a defence allowed in criminal law.

43. Ms Mehta informed the delegation that she had open channels of dialogue with big business. In her view there were some in the business sector “*keeping their heads down and hoping nothing would come of this campaign*” while others were embracing the campaign and looking to be in the vanguard of good practice. There was also a “*concerned middle*”. She stated the point of the proposed law should be to make organisations forensically check their practices.
44. The delegation then met with Ms Aaja Chemnitz Larsen MP, the Kingdom of Denmark’s representative in the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region, which has observer status on the Arctic Circle. Ms Chemnitz Larsen is also one of two Greenlandic MPs in the Danish Folketing (Parliament) and is a former Chair of the Greenlandic Human Rights Council. Her main political interests are children and young people.
45. Ms Chemnitz Larsen informed the delegation that Greenland has significant social problems like high youth unemployment and poor mental health and a brief discussion was held on these issues, in both Scotland and Greenland, before turning to issues of relating to the NZET Committee remit.
46. Ms Chemnitz Larsen stated that Greenland is at the frontline of climate change, with mudslides and the tsunamis caused by climate change becoming a new and frightening feature of Greenlandic life. She stated that Greenlandic culture has “*one foot in ancient tradition and one in modernity and we need to use this to our advantage in addressing climate change*”.
47. The delegation was informed that Greenland is a ‘big government’ state. For example, almost all public transport is state-owned. Greenland’s thinly scattered population practically mandates this approach. Depopulation outside of the capital, Nuuk, amounts to “*a growing national crisis*”. A modernised network of harbours is needed to help bring jobs and better communications to smaller communities. The economy needs to diversify as ninety-five percent of exports are fisheries. According to Ms Chemnitz Larsen this is not sustainable, particularly since stocks are being over-fished.
48. There are enormous opportunities for Greenlandic society in a green transition but long-term problems must be tackled. These include young men not pursuing further education or, when they do, going to college in Denmark and never coming back. A quarter of Greenlanders live in Denmark and brain drain is a perennial issue.
49. There has been a slow start to wind power in Greenland. There is currently one project in Nuuk harbour. A Nordic- Arctic dialogue about wind power would help Greenlanders

make up their minds about wind and, Ms Chemnitz Larsen stated, Scotland's contribution to that dialogue is welcome.

50. Ms Chemnitz Larsen's party is part of the government in Greenland. It was elected on an expressly green agenda. Greenland is a signatory to the Paris agreement but the other party in the coalition does not fully support it as it believes parts of the agreement will stop business growth and diversification. There is, according to Ms Chemnitz Larsen, some local resistance to anything branded "green" that does not always seem rational.
51. The war in Ukraine hit the pause button on the work of the Arctic Council but there are now efforts to get things moving again. The hard question is how much engagement with Russia would be appropriate to enable some work to get done. Ms Chemnitz Larsen advised that gridlock doesn't benefit anyone and that, "*we must remember that things may change in Russia*".
52. Given its location in the high north and Arctic region, and relative proximity to Russia, Greenland finds itself increasingly geopolitically "interesting". Almost 80% of the EU's current rare earth metal needs could be met by Greenland.
53. Ms Chemnitz Larsen stated that relations between Greenland and the EU are good. Greenland is treated as an OCT (Overseas Country or Territory), with access to the Horizon and Life programmes and 78% of its budget is block grant, including OCT funding.

54. Ms Chemnitz Larsen felt that there was much to learn between our respective Parliaments and committed to feeding this back back to colleagues both in Copenhagen and Nuuk with encouragement for the senior leadership of the Greenlandic Parliament to pay an official visit to the Scottish Parliament.



(L-R: Mark Ruskell MSP; Ms Aaja Chemnitz Larsen MP, Denmark’s representative in the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians of the Arctic Region; and Monica Lennon MSP)

55. The delegation then met with Iceland’s Environment, Climate and Energy Minister, Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson MP, the second such meeting since 2022. Minister Þórðarson has been in this current role since 2021 but, before that, had been Foreign Minister. The delegation was particularly grateful for the extended period of time they had with the Minister and the opportunity it provided for a detailed, in-depth discussion on topics of direct interest to the NZET Committee. Officials from the Ministry also stayed on to continue discussions after the Minister left for his next meeting.

56. On energy, the Minister believes that Iceland and Scotland can learn much from each other. Iceland has expertise to share on harnessing geothermal industry and the Minister was pleased to note this was mentioned in the MoU signed earlier in the week with the Scottish Government’s Minister for Energy and the Environment, Gillian Martin MSP.

57. The Minister advised that the vast majority of geothermal heat comes from seven plants across the country and geothermal infrastructure is accepted by Icelanders as part of the landscape. You can go “off-grid” for geothermal heat but it isn’t cheap.

58. Scotland is a case study in growing the wind sector for the Icelandic Government. Scotland's regulatory framework forms part of a current comparative study. Scotland's work surveying its seafloor is impressive. Iceland is *"nowhere near this"*, according to the Minister.
59. There will be a wind-power bill before the Althing in the next few weeks. According to the Minister, *"We need to build momentum and get past the talking stage. Iceland has almost maxed out on geothermal capacity and its green energy output has plateaued. It's high time for wind, and then solar, to be added to the mix"*.
60. According to the Minister, a place-based approach is good in principle but too much planning and mapping can be counter-productive. *"It can stop anything happening, especially in Iceland where people like an argument. So, we need to be strategic about mapping. For instance, there have been spatial studies to work out how to avoid turbines harming raptors, which is a big issue in public opinion"*.
61. The Ministers stated that the government also needs to take on the "ugliness" argument. *"A wind turbine is less of a blot on the landscape than a smelter or a geothermal plant. Maybe we could cluster some windfarms close to industrial areas. On the other hand, there are plenty of national parks around the world where there are windfarms and other developments so it is not clear why this, in itself, should be a barrier to development"*.
62. One of the big challenges will be to find the right relationship between central government and the 64 municipalities in Iceland. Right now, almost all the big taxes go to the state. Revenue-sharing would help communities wake up to the benefits of wind-power. Some municipalities are so small that they do not have the capacity to take fully informed decisions in the national interest and this needs to be addressed.
63. Iceland has a long history of hydropower and has got better at it as time has passed. Modern hydropower plants are about as efficient as it is possible to be and are salmon-friendly. There is good complementarity between wind and hydro as their peaks and troughs correlate poorly.
64. According to the Minister, there is a 10MW threshold for getting regulatory approval for most energy developments. This is good for getting small projects moving but has led to some concerns over clustering.
65. Iceland has one of the highest cars-to-people ratios in the world. On EVs, Iceland is second in the world for new purchases (60%). Since 2005, there have been financial incentives including a VAT exemption, which are considered to have worked very well. The government wants to continue the support but to switch to applied-for subsidies. Officials shared a map showing quite comprehensive national coverage for charging

points, even in the uninhabited interior. The Government does not own these but it has helped fund them.



(L-R: Monica Lennon MSP; Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson MP, Iceland's Environment, Climate and Energy Minister; and Mark Ruskell MSP)

66. The delegation's final bilateral meeting in Reykjavik was with the Chairman of the Arctic Circle Assembly and the longest serving former President of Iceland (1996-2016), H.E. Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson. Chairman Grímsson began the meeting by once again welcoming the delegation to Iceland before asking for their reflections on the Assembly. He stated that the agenda for each year's Assembly *"spreads up from the grassroots, reflecting its open, democratic character"*.
67. Chairman Grímsson was pleased to see the Scottish Parliament once again represented at the Arctic Circle Assembly and that it was a very much valued participant. He stated that *"Scotland is a welcome part of the extended Arctic family"*. The Arctic Circle is a non-political organisation, open to all with an interest, so Scotland can be a part of it, irrespective of its constitutional future.
68. Chairman Grímsson said that Scotland *"should look to the dynamic economies of the north for opportunities and to green its economy"*. Keflavik airport grows stronger every year as a regional hub for the North Atlantic, with Icelandair flying to more US cities than any other European carrier, except for British Airways. Keflavik also has links to north Asia. Chairman Grímsson felt it *"seems under-used for Scottish routes with Scotland missing tourist and enterprise opportunities as a result"*.
69. Chairman Grímsson expressed a view that Scotland should also be part of the conversation on the developing "green corridor" shipping lane running across the far

North Atlantic from Maine to Rotterdam. It is, he said, perfectly placed on the map for this and being plugged into this could help Scotland's development as a regional green energy power. Bringing the potential for expansion of green hydrogen into the equation and it begins to look especially interesting. However, this would mean significant investment to modernise harbours and docks.

70. The meeting concluded with an update from Chairman Grímsson on proposals for the new "Grímsson Center" in the grounds of the University of Iceland in Reykjavik. This new centre was first mentioned by Chairman Grímsson at last year's Arctic Circle Assembly. He said that the development is "*proceeding well*". This centre will be a permanent base for the Arctic Circle and a non-political forum for research, discussion and informal diplomacy about the Arctic neighbourhood, with climate change high on the agenda. Chairman Grímsson advised that there remains an open invitation for Scottish institutions like the Scottish Parliament or Scottish Government to be part of it

71. International Relations Office to keep track of developments with the new centre and, upon closer to completion, to explore opportunity for a possible site visit, perhaps alongside attendance at a future Arctic Circle Assembly.

NZET Committee-led breakout session: *Net Zero and Nature: Views from Parliamentarians from Scotland and the Nordic Region on the challenges of meeting wind energy and biodiversity ambitions.*

72. Mark Ruskell MSP and Monica Lennon MSP led the discussion with reflections on the situation in Iceland from two Members of the Alþing's Environment and Communications Committee: Ms Ingibjörg Isaksen MP and Mr Njáll Trausti Friðbertsson MP. The overall theme of the session was about how the expansion of wind power had been achieved in Scotland over the last 30 years, the role of legislators in that, and whether any wider lessons could be drawn from this in Iceland, or elsewhere. The Committee's recent [report on electricity infrastructure](#) was referred to during the presentation and question and answer session that followed.

73. There was a good turnout at the presentation with almost a full house in the venue and more floor questions at the end than there was time to answer. The delegation extended the allocated time of the presentation to accommodate these extra questions from the audience. The following is a summary of the key points raised during the presentation by the two participating members of the Alþing's Environment and Communications Committee.

74. Ms Ingibjörg Isaksen MP stated that geothermal and hydro energy are near capacity in Iceland as the population continues to grow. They are still reliant in diesel generators as backup in some peripheral areas and she said that, "*we need to address this to reach net zero by 2040*"

75. Ms Isaksen stated that Iceland needed to develop a wind sector for its future but that they “*need to take the public with them; and responsible progress should be the mantra*”
76. According to Ms Isaksen, the decarbonisation of transport will be difficult, especially shipping, which is disproportionately important to the Icelandic economy. However, she felt that Iceland is making progress, for instance in testing green ammonia.
77. Mr Njáll Trausti Friðbertsson MP stated that “*the Icelandic grid is central to the discussion on the future of wind-power*” and that “*a clean environment goes hand in hand with a strong grid powered by clean energy*”. The future of wind power in Iceland should be, according to Mr Friðbertsson, about centrally planning for 4-6 large windfarms right next to strong points on the grid, not having them all over. Concerns about turbines cluttering the landscape should therefore not arise. Scotland’s experience of developing visual impact assessment principles and tools was also mentioned.
78. Mr Friðbertsson advised that offshore wind will cost 3-4 times that of onshore and, given this, does not seem a realistic prospect in Iceland at the moment. The focus should, therefore, be on onshore.



(L-R: Njáll Trausti Friðbertsson MP; Monica Lennon MSP; Mark Ruskell MSP; and Ingibjörg Isaksen MP)

Roundtable Discussion

79. The delegation also participated in a round-table discussion chaired by Icelandic Environment Minister Guðlaugur Þór Þórðarson under the Chatham House rule. He primarily wanted to hear views on how Iceland could expand wind power but also

about green energy security, more generally. The group included President Obama's senior scientific adviser, the head of an energy based in Iceland, senior energy policy officials from the Scottish Government and experts in nuclear power. This was the first such occasion the Scottish Parliament's delegation at the Arctic Circle Assembly had been invited to participate in the round table discussion.

80. Some conclusions reached from Icelandic participants from the discussion were that: Icelandic's 20th century transformation to become self-sufficient in green energy was "*a visionary act of political will*". The same attitude and leadership was, it was stated, needed for the 21st century.
81. There is huge capacity for global expansion of geothermal power and a nation does not have to be right over a hotspot to utilise it. Icelandic expertise is currently being used to bring geothermal power to some Chinese cities, for example.
82. The third dangerous barrier to net zero is 'nimbyism' which seems to be getting ever more extreme in parts of the developed world. "*You cannot compromise with anyone who seems to be against all development as this is not a serious position*", according to one participant. "*You need to show leadership and make the big decisions*", said another. It was noted that government's need to win people's consent and support with a focus on the just transition: more and better paid jobs and bread-and-butter issues like the cost of energy.
83. As highlighted previously, in addition to nine bilateral meetings held over the course of the Assembly proceedings, the delegation attended four plenary sessions and ten breakout sessions. Details of these sessions can be found in the Annex however, to summarise, the topics discussed during these sessions were: fast tracking a just, orderly, and equitable energy transition; fixing climate finance; food security; green hydrogen; offshore wind energy in the North Atlantic (including the building of a North Atlantic green energy hub); critical minerals in the Arctic; and the challenge of decarbonising Arctic Shipping by 2030
84. **The delegation found these sessions to be very useful in enhancing and reaffirming their overall knowledge of subject matters which fall under the remit of the NZET Committee (and others).**

Conclusions

85. **As the largest annual international gathering on the Arctic, the Assembly provides a unique opportunity to attend several workshops and discussions on topics of direct relevance to Scottish Parliament committees.**
86. **Just as importantly, however, is the opportunity this annual gathering of Ministers, parliamentarians, NGOs, academics etc provides to hold bi-lateral**

meetings on subject matters of direct and topical relevance to members of the Scottish Parliament delegation, particularly those meetings at a political level.

- 87. The Scottish Parliament presence at, and involvement in, the annual Assembly is very much welcomed by the Chairman of the Arctic Circle Assembly, Icelandic Ministers and Icelandic parliamentarians and it is the view of the International Relations Office that participation in the Assembly enhances both the profile and reputation of the Scottish Parliament, particularly when combined with bilateral meetings in the Althing and with Ministers. This enhanced reputation and profile of the Parliament can be seen in the Parliament's inclusion in the roundtable discussion – a first for Members of the delegation.**
- 88. It is recommended that participation in the annual Assembly continue in 2024; with a pause in 2025 given Scottish parliamentary elections the following year. Due to the clear interest in Scotland and its approach to climate change and other devolved policy areas by our international partners, it is recommended that a breakout session once again be included as part of the 2024 Assembly. Given the success of this year's joint presentation with members of the Althing's Environment and Communications Committee, and the raising of the Scottish Parliament's profile this brought, it is recommended that strong consideration once again be given to repeating this exercise – perhaps widening it out to parliamentarians from other Nordic partners.**
- 89. While it is for the SPCB to approve the funding of such visits, the 2023 delegation believe that future participation by the Scottish Parliament should be considered and, if plenary themes and breakout sessions are a good fit with committee remits and work streams, supported. Members of the delegation believe that this our participation in the work of the Assembly not only enhances the profile and reputation of the Scottish Parliament but is a good professional development opportunity for participating Members.**

**International Relations Office
November 2023**

Annex: Programme

Wednesday 18 October 2023

- Depart Glasgow / Edinburgh (Monica Lennon MSP and Steven Bell)
- Arrive Reykjavik
- Habitat Restoration site visits (Mark Ruskell MSP and Peter McGrath)
- Reception hosted by the British Ambassador to Iceland, H.E. Dr Bryony Mathew

Thursday 19 October 2023

- Bilateral Meeting 1: Standing Committee on the Environment and Communications, followed by short tour of Parliament buildings (and opportunity to observe Chamber business)
- Breakout Session 1: Jointly delivered by NZET Committee members Monica Lennon MSP and Mark Ruskell MSP and the Environment and Communications Committee members Ingibjörg Isaksen MP and Njáll Trausti Friðbertsson MP. Breakout Session title, *“Net Zero and Nature: Views from Parliamentarians from Scotland and the Nordic Region on the challenges of meeting wind energy and biodiversity ambitions”*.
- Plenary Session 1: Welcome speeches; the Norwegian Chairmanship of the Arctic Council; COP28; Panel Discussion by Climate ministers; Future of Arctic Investment
- Bilateral Meeting 2: Ms Jojo Mehta, Chair, Stop Ecocide Foundation: Overview of proposed new ecocide law; the importance of criminal law.
- Breakout Session 2: Arctic Green Energy Security: Community and Indigenous LED Renewable Energy Projects
- Receptions: Hosted by the UK Parliament’s All-Party Group on the Polar Regions and the British Embassies in Reykjavik and Denmark; followed by a welcome reception hosted by the Prime Minister of Iceland & the Foreign Minister of Iceland

Friday 20 October 2023

- Breakout Session 3: Off-Shore Wind Energy in the North Atlantic, organised by Nordic Energy Research
- Breakout Session 4: Building a North Atlantic Green Energy Hub, organised by Nordic Energy Research in close collaboration with the Scottish Government, the Government of Greenland, the Government of Iceland and the Government of the Faroe Islands
- Breakout Session 5: Strengthening Protection of the Arctic: The Importance of Criminal Law, organised by the Republic of Vanuatu; Stop Ecocide Foundation; and Stöðvum Vistmorð, Iceland.
- Roundtable Meeting 1: Clean Energy Development and Transitions in the Arctic, chaired by Halla Hrund Logadóttir, Director General of the National Energy

Authority of Iceland, and attended by Iceland's Minister for the Environment, Energy and Climate, Gudlaugur Thór Thórdarson MP.

- Plenary Session 2: The Arctic Policy of the UK; The Arctic Vision of the USA; The Vision of Belgium: Arctic and the Climate; Security and Defence of the Arctic
- Bilateral Meeting 3: Aaja Chemnitz MP, Chair of the Standing Committee of Parliamentarians in the Arctic Region
- Breakout Session 6: From the North Sea to the Arctic: Creating Mutual Energy Security, organised by EGMONT – Royal Institute for International Relations, Belgium; The Scottish Government; The Arctic Institute, USA
- Breakout Session 7: Beyond Polar Bears and Penguins - Why the Ice Crisis Matters to All of Us, organised by Global Choices; Mission Blue, USA; Re- Earth Initiative; Columbia University Earth Institute, USA; Prince Albert II of Monaco Foundation
- Bilateral Meeting 4: Gudlaugur Thór Thórdarson MP, Minister of the Environment, Energy and Climate, Icelandic Government
- Plenary Session 3: Green Hydrogen: The Energy Future of the North; The US Energy Mission

Saturday 21 October 2023

- Breakout Session 8: Taking Action to Deliver on the Green Transition, organised by Fortescue Future Industries; Green Hydrogen Organisation
- Breakout Session 8: Critical Minerals in the Arctic –Responsible, Sustainable, Equitable? Organised by UK Science and Innovation Network
- Breakout Session 9: Land and Water Stewardship Through Arts and Culture, organised by Anchorage Museum, USA
- Breakout Session 10: Arctic Shipping 2030, organised by Clean Arctic Alliance
- Plenary Session 4: The NATO Perspective on the Arctic; Arctic Science and Diplomacy; Critical Minerals in the Arctic;
- Bilateral Meeting 5: Chairman of the Arctic Circle Assembly and Former President of Iceland, Ólafur Ragnar Grímsson
- Closing reception

Sunday 22 October

- Depart Keflavik
- Arrive Glasgow