AROS

ANTI-RACISM
OBSERVATORY
FOR SCOTLAND

A RAPID ANTI-RACIST REVIEW OF COSLA'S 2022-27 PLAN

September 2026

AROS ANTI-RACISM OBSERVATORY FOR SCOTLAND

COSLA Rapid Review

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Summary of recommendations

- **Create an Anti-Racism Action Plan and Policy Stream** – by creating dedicated timelines, actions, and resources to commit to defined anti-racism goals tailored to COSLA.
- **Review the experiences of staff within COSLA** – by creating set touch points such as surveys and roundtables to identify staff confidence, competence, and ambition regarding Anti-Racism which should identify areas of development for COSLA.
- **Strengthen anti-racist approaches to community involvement and engagement** – by celebrating inclusive and diverse community work currently being done and reviving commitments to strong racial diversity across community co-production and consultation.
- **Support and strengthen enhanced ethnicity data and evidence gathering** – by incorporating anti-racism across evidence and insight functions, and working with partners and Local Government to strengthen ethnicity recording.

AROS Vision and Values

AROS, in partnership with communities, creates the conditions so that anti-racist scrutiny, accountability, implementation, and monitoring become routine and unavoidable features of Scotland's public sector, leading to a reduction in systemic racism across Scotland. We work with communities, for communities.

We acknowledge both the historic and ongoing nature of racism, as well as the role of white privilege in sustaining inequities. We understand that racism compounds with other systems of oppression including classism, sexism, ableism, homophobia, transphobia, antigypsyism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, and xenophobia, and we hold all of these in view. We are explicit that systemic racism disproportionately impacts Black people, and we are committed to naming and addressing that directly. We work with all impacted communities towards a Scotland where racial justice is not the exception, but the norm.

We envision that anti-racism becomes a normal, expected, and measurable part of how public institutions in Scotland operate. We want organisations to move beyond statements of intent and take practical, visible steps to change structures, behaviors, and outcomes. Anti-racism should be embedded in leadership decisions, including workforce development, policy design, and service delivery. Ultimately, success means that public bodies demonstrate measurable shifts in culture, policy, and practice, converting to less racism affecting communities most harmed in the past.

Our Rapid Review Approach

Anti-racist reviews are not intended to diagnose either systemic or interpersonal racism. Systemic racism as a mode of marginalisation exists in Scotland and is well documented[1]. Therefore, our institutions and national organisations should assume that this has repercussions and impacts at all levels of Scottish civic society, and within our organisations. The task of anti-racism is not just to deplore racism but to methodically disentangle our structures and institutions from ways of working which cause harm to marginalised groups. See glossary for a more complete definition of anti-racism.

In this document, AROS has reviewed each section of COSLA's 2022-27 plan to identify areas of positive impact, gaps, and opportunities towards greater anti-racist practice, enquiry, and policy development. As COSLA does not currently have an explicit anti-racism policy/workstream, this document does not assess the quality of any anti-racist initiatives or broader equality related work. We aim to provide an opportunity for reflection, provocation, and recommendations for future action that could support COSLA to become an organisation that is confident to embed anti-racism across all workstreams for the benefit of staff, local government, and Scotland as a whole.

Methodology

AROS undertook a desk-based rapid review AROS reviewed the following documents provided by COSLA:

- COSLA Plan 2022-2027
- COSLA constitution 2021
- Verity House Agreement
- COSLA Vision, Principles and Values

We assessed COSLA's strategy documents with the following questions in mind:

- Is there evidence of anti-racist work taking place?
- Is there potential within currents actions for anti-racist work?
- What opportunities are there for expanded anti-racist work?
- Could any of elements of the strategy present a barrier for anti-racist work?

Using these thematic questions, we reviewed each of the 2022-27 priorities and fed this into a wider set of recommendations for future actions that COSLA can take forward, as it continues its journey toward becoming an explicitly anti-racist organisation.

[1] Scottish Government (2026) Anti-racism delivery plan 2026-2030.

A note on anti-racism in low diversity workplaces

AROS recognises that many organisations and workplaces in Scotland, by nature of demographic trends, do not enjoy racial diversity at all levels. This can often present a dilemma wherein there is genuine will to undertake anti-racist initiatives, but staff can struggle to understand how this is relevant to them. Organisations can also worry about the burden expanding anti-racist initiatives can put on adversely racialised staff, where anti-racist expertise is not readily available.

This review has been written with this in mind. anti-racist initiatives and change can and should be designed to operate within organisations with low racial diversity. There is a misconception that explicitly anti-racist practices and policies only affect adversely racialised staff. Such policies and ways of working can improve working conditions for all staff. Impact can be even greater for client or service user facing organisations.

While staff diversity can have a positive effect on anti-racism proficiency, and eliminating hiring bias is an important element of organisation level anti-racism strategies, any organisation can begin to understand and take steps toward transformative change despite the demographic make-up of their staff group.

The COSLA plan 2022-2027

Strengthen Local Democracy

"Through a re-established and revived relationship with Scottish Government, based on trust and mutual respect, Local Government is empowered to lead and act to ensure local democracy in Scotland adapts to deliver even more effective and inclusive representation of the range of needs and views expressed by our diverse communities."[2]

COSLA's strategic commitment to ensuring national and local government work in harmony to represent communities demonstrates a powerful area for consideration when related to anti-racism.

One exercise that may be of benefit to COSLA's anti-racism goals is to undertake a short review of consultation activities undertaken during the Local Governance Review, to establish how many racially diverse participants or organisations led by racially diverse people contributed, and to balance this against the findings.

It was noted that the Democracy Matters form for respondents did not ask participants about ethnic background or intersecting marginalities[3]. This could be a missed opportunity to enhance work and to engage seldom heard participants presuming that other elements of the methodological approach did not explicitly target marginalised groups.

AROS welcomes COSLA's work to increase representation of underrepresented groups in Local Government. This is clearly a significant programme of work that is addressing concerns of marginalised groups by tackling the toxic atmosphere in politics that can be a key barrier preventing women and minority groups from standing for elected office. Specific research to understand barriers for adversely racialised groups would be an important next step in this work. AROS recommends further work with organisations led by racialised communities / anti-racist organisations to support broader work on civic engagement, and collaborative intersectional research to better understand what barriers exist. To further work to address civility in politics, AROS recommends anti-racist capacity building for elected members to equip them with training and resources about racism specifically.

Secure Sustainable Funding

"In order that communities continue to get the support and high-quality services they need, we will work to ensure that Local Government is funded fairly and has multi-year financial settlements. This would mean more certainty for not only our workforce but for our communities and the services they

[2] COSLA (2022) COSLA Plan 2022-2027.
[3] Scottish Government (2018) Democracy Matters Supporting Documents.

rely on every day. It will also mean that councils can continue to innovate and lead transformation in the public sector but not at the expense of service delivery."

COSLA's planned actions in relation to sustainable funding agreements with Scottish Government could have significant impacts on the ability of local authorities to carry out high-quality anti-racism work, and are therefore essential. Of particular note is COSLA's commitment to "*Work with the Scottish and UK Governments to ensure that investment into and by Local Government supports swift and bold local action in response to changing circumstances"*. There has been a clear relationship between emerging resource challenges like social security and housing, and the rise in racist rhetoric in Scotland, as disadvantaged communities feel they are being asked to compete for resources. Examples of this are the response of the far-right to services for refugees in the city of Glasgow[4]. Ensuring councils are adequately funded to deliver equal outcomes for all groups therefore is an anti-racist action in and of itself as it can reduce scapegoating.

While continuing strong public advocacy towards a fair settlement with the government for local authorities, COSLA could also consider the relationship between funding and the abilities of local authorities to comply with the public sector equality duty, and in particular the requirement to "foster good relations". A report by Shelter Scotland outlined how this can be put in jeopardy in relation to housing, specifically when funding is not adequate to meet the challenges of the housing emergency, but this is the case across many other areas of local government[5].

Improve the Wellbeing of Individuals, Families & Communities

"Local Government develops sustainable outcome-focused services with support for wellbeing at the core. Any services provided by the National Care Service are subject to local democratic control, enhance local outcomes and focus on the needs of local people."

While it is the understanding of AROS that COSLA's approach to the National Care Service may have changed since this plan's inception, there is nonetheless an important role to be played by COSLA and similar organisations in using high-quality evidence to contribute to policy discussions on Scotland's requirements for improved social care. Evidence of demographic change and make up of diverse populations could contribute to strong advocacy in future. COSLA should consider if they hold evidence that could contribute to well-planned care reforms that are responsive to Scotland's diverse and changing populations needs. This includes work to establish how adversely racialised communities are affected by social care, and disproportionate rates of unpaid carers within racialised communities. This further intersects with the impact that unpaid caring responsibilities have on women, who in turn make up a significant part of the paid care workforce[6].

[4] Learmonth, A. (2026) Glasgow MP calls for cohesion strategy after far-right riot. The Herald.
[5] Shelter Scotland (2025) Systemic Racism and Scotland's Housing Emergency Report.
[6] CarersUK (2023) Supporting Black, Asian, and minority ethic carers: A good practice briefing.

In relation to COSLA's action of improving the support for social care and social work workforces, it would be appropriate for COSLA to consider the capacity within these sectors for anti-racism in light of research highlighting widespread inequality within social care[7]. Recommendations have been made for increased training provision. Such work would improve outcomes for adversely racialised staff and service users. It was noted that COSLA have an existing workstream dedicated to workforce research in social care and this could be enhanced by further research into the experiences of the adversely racialised social care workforce in Scotland.

It was noted that COSLA's community engagement and participation guidance for social care's principles of engagement and participation could be enhanced by inclusion of specific provisions or sources on anti-racism. AROS could not immediately identify examples of these in use for social care already, and has taken on action to conduct further research.

Deliver a Just Transition to a Net Zero Economy

"In line with the principles of a 'just transition', Local Government makes a meaningful contribution to the 2030 climate change target and is a key leader and driver of local economies."

COSLA's commitments to continuing to develop a just transition are welcomed by AROS. Various research indicates the disproportionate impact of the climate crisis on adversely racialised communities[8].

As COSLA continues to argue for greater investment into local government for net-zero projects and programmes, it should ensure that a wide range of communities are engaged in this work. Research suggests that adversely racialised communities are severely underrepresented within both the climate sector and public conversations that take place on the topic[9]. There are examples of strong work being funded at a local authority level in Scotland already, such as the work being supported by CEMVO Scotland on the Race Equality Environmental Programme. These examples of good practice can be used as models for success and should be increased[10].

As Scotland moves toward a net zero economy, the requirements of our workforce will undoubtedly change. COSLA may wish to consider the role it can play in supporting a just transition for adversely racialised groups currently underrepresented within careers associated with net zero. There are examples of good practice by local authorities in England, taking forward dedicated programmes to

[7] Institute of Public Care (2024) Structural Racism Within Social Care.
[8] Chapman, N. (2022) How will the environmental crises impact ethnic minority groups in the UK?
[9] McLoughlin et al. (2024) Ethnicity and UK climate perceptions: Why we need greater diversity in engagement and research.
[10] CEMVO Scotland (2026) Climate Justice.

address this underrepresentation by running "Green Skills" programmes for marginalised young people[11].

Enhance Education & Support for our Children & Young People

"Local Government develops and secures the best education for all our children and young people and provides wider learning and support while tackling poverty and social inequality."

The links between education, poverty and social inequality are particularly pronounced for adversely racialised children and young people[12]. In Scotland there is a considerable volume of anti-racist reform within the education sector driven by the Scottish Government's Anti-Racism in Education Programme (AREP)[13]. COSLA should consider their existing position in relation to AREP and ensure that links are being drawn between workstreams, as much of the work of the programme addresses attainment and the link between race and SIMD. This could include expanding representation and engagement with the programme itself and supporting the need for stronger data and evidence for adversely racialised children and young people regarding education and attainment.

AROS welcomes specific actions by COSLA to keep The Promise. If not already in progress, COSLA should engage with existing work with adversely racialised care experienced young people and care leavers, such as work carried out by the Black Promise led by Passion4Fusion[14]. This would allow COSLA to ensure all work done to keep The Promise is informed by those with lived experience who have experienced racism within and from the care system. Similar to the case for attainment, anti-racism work within the care system can be hindered by a lack of data and evidence. Currently in Scotland, it is not a requirement to record the ethnicities of children and young people taken into care. COSLA should consider if this falls within the scope of their work regarding The Promise, and what role COSLA could take in enhancing evidence.

Support the Most Vulnerable in our Communities

"Local Government supports individuals and families through focussing on the realisation of human rights and tackling poverty and inequalities, particularly where the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the Cost-of-Living crisis is impacting negatively on their life opportunities and chances."

Across all points listed within this priority, there is a clear crossover with anti-racism due to the relationship between ethnicity, poverty and inequality. Adversely racialised communities are more

[11] Black South West Network (2026) Green Skills for Work and Business.
[12] Education Scotland (2025) Evidence and insights on the poverty-related attainment gap: A presentation.
[13] Scottish Government (2026) Anti-Racism in Education Programme.
[14] Passion4fusion (2025) The Black Promise, A Safe Space to Make Change.

likely to experience poverty[15], homelessness[16], unemployment, and be impacted by the cost-of-living crisis than their white counterparts due to historic and ongoing structural inequality. Therefore, AROS welcomes dedicated action to support vulnerable communities across all protected characteristics, in recognition of the fact that many will hold multiple marginalities. Below are listed ways anti-racist work could be enhanced across the actions described in the plan.

On housing, of note should be Shelter Scotland and Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights' (CRER) recommendations to local authorities on actions to reduce disproportionate levels of homelessness within adversely racialised communities, strengthening housing rights for all groups, and the role this plays for migrant communities and New Scots. COSLA may wish to consider the role they play in guiding and supporting local authorities to become actively anti-racist in both their housing services and wider work. This could be taken forward by COSLA's housing special interest group.

As COSLA continues to work with Social Security Scotland, support should be given to address the lower uptake of social security benefits in adversely racialised communities, and the need for increased dedicated income maximisation[17].

On Employability, COSLA may be aware of existing work being carried in Scotland dedicated to anti-racism. Of note is CEMVO Scotland's work and programmes[18]. Additionally, the Anti-Racist Employment Strategy produced by the Scottish Government, which recommends clear actions to improve internal ethnicity recording for organisations and conduct dedicated work to improve recruitment practices and organisational culture[19]. Adversely racialised communities face systemic barriers to equal employment and are more likely than their white counterparts to face unemployment and underemployment[20]. COSLA could play an important role in ensuring that recommendations and national strategy with regard to employability work for adversely racialised communities are implemented across Local Government.

On COSLA's action on those with Refugee and Migration status, AROS welcomes the large volume of work done by COSLA on resettlement and supporting New Scots. To strengthen visibility of this work, AROS recommends more clearly highlighting which partners COSLA is working with on this stream to give a clear vision of how lived experience is shaping COSLA's outcomes.

On Community Justice, AROS recognises the need for further research on the intersections between community justice models and anti-racism within the Scottish context. AROS is keen to understand the role of victim support in the context of The Hate Crime and Public Order (Scotland) Act 2021 and

[15] Coalition for Racial Equality and Rights (2025) Ethnicity and Socio-Economic Deprivation in Scotland.
[16] Shelter Scotland (2025) Systemic Racism and Scotland's Housing Emergency.
[17] Scottish Government (2020) Social Security Experience Panels: Ethnic Minorities.
[18] CEMVO Scotland (2026) Employability.
[19] Scottish Government (2022) A Fairer Scotland for All: An Anti-Racist Employment Strategy.
[20] Employability in Scotland (2026) Ethnic Minorities and Employment.

how COSLA supports this work through the community justice stream. We recommend further discussion on this point.

Recommendations

While COSLA remains at the beginning of their journey to becoming an actively anti-racist organisation, it is clear from reviewing the 2022-27 action plan that there is strong potential to maximise impact for adversely racialised communities. COSLA's priority areas reflect the needs of a diverse population, and areas where COSLA can utilise evidence and deepen its anti-racist proficiency, the organisation is well placed to build community trust and carry out high-quality anti-racist work across their existing streams. Further, COSLA's structure allows for strong integration of anti-racism within existing workstreams, as these thematic areas have crossover with priority areas for adversely racialised groups. AROS has outlined recommendations for how COSLA can integrate anti-racism within its existing structures.

Create an Anti-Racism Action Plan and Policy Stream

COSLA would be best supported in its work to pursue anti-racist change and development by ensuring there are specific and targeted actions represented within the existing governance framework of the organisation. While anti-racism policies are often seen as add-ons, action plans can be helpful to track specific measures and outcomes, and can ensure whole organisation buy-in. These actions should always connect to wider governance structures to ensure the normalisation of anti-racism work, and to reiterate that anti-racism should always be on the agenda. An action plan would clearly narrate what an anti-racist COSLA would look like by setting out a tailored mission and principles that consider the scope and scale of the organisation.

AROS would recommend that COSLA articulates its anti-racist goals as a baseline (for example, increasing staff capacity for anti-racism, designing anti-racist recruitment policies, surveying staff, etc.) and works toward creating specific anti-racist actions below each of the 6 priorities within the wider COSLA plan. This should be connected to a wider equalities/EDI plan, and address the role of intersectionality. Actions should be succinct and incorporated into existing methods of continuous review e.g. annual strategy reviews, progress reports, etc. The most successful anti-racism strategies are clearly owned within an existing element of the organisation/business; here COSLA's team structure is well placed to take on anti-racism policy streams and thar work can be dictated by COSLA's needs, capacity, and structure. Anti-racist change at an organisational level is not a quick-fix, and should mean a long term and sustainable plan towards transformation. Therefore, any strategy or policy should set out clear timelines. Wherever possible, there should be co-production of this work with affected communities and subject matter experts.

It was noted that a policy stream for improving outcomes for Gypsy and Roma Traveller groups is integrated into the work of the Migration and Population team. AROS could not gauge the level of community involvement within the workstream, but noted clear examples of actions put in place. A dedicated stream for improving outcomes for all adversely racialised communities would be

advisable, and COSLA could advocate for support from the Scottish Government. It would be for COSLA to dictate where this policy stream best sits within the organisation, but it was evident as part of the rapid review that COSLA would benefit from a specific policy focus on anti-racism, which could enhance the work of the Migration and Population team across all of their focus areas.

Review the experiences of staff within COSLA

As COSLA has a unique organisational structure and remit, it should consider a wide-ranging review of staff and elected member experiences. This would support the work COSLA is already undertaking to increase representation of elected members by identifying existing barriers for staff to bring anti-racism more succinctly into their roles. This review would serve as a method of creating a clear baseline of confidence staff have around anti-racism, and can be repeated to measure the effectiveness of anti-racist trainings, initiatives, and policies. A clear account of staff experiences is vital when developing an impactful anti-racism plan or strategy.

Strengthen approaches to community involvement and engagement

As one of the key principles of AROS's approach to anti-racism, ensuring adversely racialised voices are heard and amplified is essential to changing the status quo. It was noted at several points within the review that it was difficult to identify whether community consultation efforts commissioned by or in partnership with COSLA were able to reflect the diversity of Scotland, and if consultations prioritised hearing from groups with intersectional experiences of multiple marginalities.

AROS understands that COSLA undertakes community engagement in a limited capacity, whereby most engagement is carried out by individual member councils. Where consultation work is undertaken in partnership with external organisations or researchers, COSLA, as a large national organisation, can use this as an opportunity to encourage all partners undertaking engagement work on behalf of COSLA to directly consider how they will use engagement methods to build relationships with adversely racialised groups. This could act to increase the normalisation of explicitly anti-racist informed community work. Consideration should always be given when designing consultation work that engages with marginalised groups to ensure that employed methods resist extractive community work, meaningfully engage with co-design of consultation activities, ensure fair renumeration, and allow participants agency in how they engage with the process. While COSLA may not take forward this work themselves, where member councils show examples of strong work in this area, COSLA should work to amplify and share this across localities to increase uptake of inclusive methods.

It may be the case that COSLA is already pursuing a similar workstream due to the large levels of community engagement carried out by COSLA. Where this work is undertaken, details of the approach taken to engage adversely racialised communities should be published, as this can act to

increase transparency and strengthen trust with marginalised communities. It also acts a strong example of good practice that other organisations and Local Government can replicate.

Support and strengthen enhanced ethnicity data and evidence gathering

It was noted at various stages of the rapid review that multiple COSLA key priority areas echo areas of concern for anti-racist organisations and programmes, specifically around data and evidence. COSLA is well positioned to support local authorities to gather further and better-quality ethnicity data, as well as explore the ways in which evidence can enhance work related to increasing representation of elected members. The documents provided to AROS do not make clear the scope of COSLA's evidence gathering capacity, nor the role COSLA takes concerning the collection of evidence within local government. However, as a body, there is a clear role for COSLA leading the way in supporting and producing high-quality evidence gathering which could have a particularly positive impact on anti-racism work within COSLA's priority areas.

ANNEX A – Glossary

Adversely racialised

Individuals or groups who suffer adverse consequence due to racialisation (see below) because of the domination over their assigned group by (an)other group(s).

Anti-racism

The deliberate transformation of systems, institutions and cultures to identify, challenge and dismantle structural racism by redistributing power, embedding accountability, centring the knowledge and experiences of racialised communities, and ensuring equitable outcomes through sustained governance, evidence and collective action.

Intersectionality

When different forms of inequality or discrimination (e.g. because of age, gender, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc.) come together to create further discrimination and oppression.

"Race"

A social and political system that classifies people into a hierarchy based on interpretations of factors like physical appearance, social factors and cultural backgrounds

Racialisation

The process through which social meaning is assigned to individuals or groups based on shared characteristics such as phenotype, culture, language, nationality, religion, and class for the purpose of generating or maintaining a hierarchy where some groups have dominance over others.

Racism

A system of structuring opportunity and assigning value based on the social interpretation of how one looks, that unfairly disadvantages some individuals and communities, unfairly advantages other individuals and communities, and saps the strength of the whole society through the waste of human resources[21].

[21] AROS Design Advisory Group (2024) Word Bank.