

Scottish Government Legislative Programme 2014-15



Introduction

The New First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, announced her Programme for Government this week and re-stated her commitment to “build a sense of shared endeavour about how we create a wealthier more equal society”. This briefing gives an overview of the proposals and links to the full programme and forthcoming Bills.

Legislative Programme

Local Government

The independent commission to find a new way forward on local government finance offers hope, at least, of a political consensus being agreed. UNISON has been calling for parties to come together to find a solution for a long time. Given that the Burt Commission has already conducted a detailed examination of the options then the commission can focus on agreeing a solution to the political rather than practical challenges involved in introducing a new tax. Commitments on NHS funding are all well and good, but continuing the regressive Council Tax freeze means that councils will continue to take the brunt of cuts. The small business bonus remains a waste of resource, with no evidence that it's done anything for jobs or investment. An extra £5million for delayed discharge, especially when councils are expected to match the funding, will do nothing for the national disgrace that is our social care system. The serious challenges facing our care services need a more substantial response than very modest support for carers. Devolution of powers to the islands is welcome but there is no reason why these powers should not be available to all local authorities. Community Justice to local government is welcome, but we need to ensure that this is proper local accountability, not just administration.

Living Wage: The extra £200,000 for the Scottish Living Wage accreditation scheme is welcome along with more ambitious targets. The big gap is on procurement and the statutory guidance is promised "in the next year". If Boris Johnson can deliver on procurement and the living wage then a First Minister committed to social justice must.

Fair Work convention The Fair Work Convention and Scottish Business Pledge are a welcome statement of intent that a better approach to industrial relations is possible in Scotland. A practical implementation test would be the inclusion of union representatives on public bodies, as recommended by the Mather Commission.

KEY POINTS:

There will be a new commission on alternatives to the council tax but the freeze remains in place until the end of this parliament

There was a further commitment to the Living Wage and extra funding for the accreditation scheme but the gap on procurement remains

There will be a new Fair Work Convention and Scottish Business Pledge with the aim of finding a better approach to industrial relations.



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Land Reform Bill. A new bill is promised which will: establish a land reform commission, improve transparency and accountability of land ownership, ensure that charities holding large areas of land engage with local communities and the remove business rates exemptions for shooting and deer stalking estates. The proposals are not as radical as the review group recommended, despite the reaction from landowners would have you believe that they are victims of armed robbery. The business rate anomaly is a genuinely positive step forward, and is expected to provide approx £7m extra for the Scottish Land Fund.

Gender: improving the gender balance on public, private and third sector boards is a welcome commitment as is the recognition of the enduring equal pay gap. Investment in Modern Apprenticeships is welcome but the current programme has challenges, in particular how the process continues rather than challenges the gender stratification in the workforce. Gender segregated jobs remain common in public and voluntary services. With a cost of £600m and rising there remains a compelling case for Government action on pay equality across the public sector.

Education: Strengthening childcare, improving literacy and access to Higher Education are all issues that UNISON has campaigned for. So is access to further education which continues to be neglected by this government. Abolishing tuition fees is the right policy, but even England with high upfront tuition fees outperforms Scotland in terms of numbers of students from less well off backgrounds accessing higher education. Much more needs to be done. Setting targets and a commission offers a process but urgent action is needed. The promised expansion of childcare is very welcome but needs a commitment to both public sector delivery and investment now in training additional staff to ensure that there are enough appropriately qualified staff to actually deliver the service when the promised expansions is implemented.

Police: The 1000 extra police officer target continues to cause serious problems. Police officers sitting behind desks, substituting for police civilians who do a better job at a fraction of the cost are absurd. UNISON raised the issue of VAT liability when Police Scotland was originally proposed so the plan was implemented knowing that this would be the case. A national police board built up from local government would have qualified for VAT exemption.

Bills

- Budget Bill
- Education Bill
- Higher Education Governance Bill
- Carers Bill
- Public Health Bill
- Human Trafficking and Exploitation Bill
- Community Justice Bill
- Land Reform Bill
- Succession Bill
- Harbours Bill
- Community Charge Debt Bill
- Fatal Accident Inquiries Bill

Conclusion

The programme is stronger on highlighting challenges than offering solutions, but there are good opportunities for UNISON to promote our agenda for improved public services and increased funding through the new processes being set out in the programme.

Further info

First Minister's statement

<http://news.scotland.gov.uk/News/Programme-for-Government-12b0.aspx>

Legislative programme

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2014/11/6336>

UNISON Public Works campaign

<http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/publicworks/index.html>



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