

Programme for Scotland 2011-12

Introduction

The Scottish Government has published its programme for the coming year. The document sets out the legislative and other actions it plans to deliver. This briefing outlines the main items of interest to UNISON.

Workforce Issues

The programme confirms no-compulsory redundancies until March 2012, although that still doesn't cover local government. The concept of a 'social wage' offers a trade off between pay restraint and benefits including the frozen council tax, living wage, prescription charges and concessionary travel. However, many of these benefits don't apply to workers who are suffering real term pay cuts. In particular, the Council Tax freeze is a regressive tax cut that helps the richest households the most. The Government's position on pay is expected to be clarified later this month.

Public services

A Cabinet sub-committee on public service reform will take forward the Christie Commission recommendations. The programme reflects Christie with commitments on integrated working, local partnerships, outcomes and preventative spending. There is also support for the Christie proposals on workforce development and in particular the importance of workforce engagement.

The programme also reflects Christie on structural reform; "Where structural reform is required in order to achieve the required outcomes and value for money it should proceed, but leadership and culture matter more than structure."

Utilities

A Water Bill will take forward the ideas in the recent 'Hydro Nation' consultation. UNISON welcomes this development and the commitment to retain Scottish Water in public ownership. There are also new commitments to invest in renewable energy although we would like to see a more balanced energy policy. A new Climate Challenge Fund is welcome although we would like to see more action on public duties in relation to climate change.

Housing

Housing investment was cut heavily in this year's budget and so we would be concerned about the plan to abolish the Housing Support Grant. This may simply be another way of spreading limited cash even more thinly. However, we welcome the council house building programme.

KEY POINTS:

- The programme sets out the Government's legislative and other plans for 2011-12.
- Significant programme of public service reform based on Christie Commission recommendations.
- Bills on single police & fire services.
- New legislation on children, water, housing and alcohol pricing.
- No dismantling of the NHS in Scotland.
- Integration of services for older people.



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Health & Care

On the day that ConDem MP's voted to dismantle the NHS in England, UNISON welcomes the Scottish Government's commitment to "hold firm to the values of the NHS, which are so important to the people of Scotland. We will foster a mutual NHS, working competently and collaboratively to deliver healthcare which is free at the point of need. We shall not go down the route being pursued in England." The same applies to partnership working as "NHS Scotland staff will continue to be fully involved in shaping the future NHS, benefiting from partnership arrangements which are the envy of many, within and outwith Scotland."

On care integration it appears that the Government will focus initially on older people, "delivering the integration of health and social care and improving joint working with other agencies and the voluntary sector." There will be a consultation later this month. A Social Care (Self-directed Support) Bill will be introduced and UNISON has some concerns that this approach should not become the new 'one size fits all' policy. It is already being used to cut social care in some areas.

An Alcohol Bill will bring minimum pricing as a condition of licences with the actual minimum price being specified in subordinate legislation. UNISON agrees that we need to do something to reduce consumption and the impact that alcohol misuse has on public health. However, we are sceptical that this is the right method to achieve this and there may well be a legal challenge.

Justice

The programme claims an "additional 1,000 police officers on the beat in Scotland." Sadly many of these officers are far from "on the beat" - they are substituting for police staffs. It is hard to take the Government commitment to focussing on 'outcomes' seriously when they persist with this policy. There will also be a Bill to create a single Scottish Police Service and a single Fire & Rescue Service. UNISON remains sceptical about these plans and we will look carefully at the new consultation papers. There is a promise to realistically fund community alternatives to prison.

Education & Children's Services

There are a number of initiatives that expand provision and develop the early year's workforce. Essential if preventative spending is to be adopted. There will be new legislation on the rights of children and young people and consultation on a draft Children's Services Bill. The Early Years Change Fund aims to deliver effective early intervention and a new generation of children and family centres across Scotland.

There will be a Pre Legislative Paper on Post-16 Education this month. There is a commitment to free higher education and a guarantee that all 16-19 year olds will get a place in post-16 learning. A new Careers Strategy is also promised and we hope it is more than a new web site.

Conclusion

There is much in the programme that UNISON would welcome recognising the current financial constraints. However, some proposals are inconsistent with the overall objectives and others will require considerable scrutiny.

Further info

Renewing Scotland The Government's Programme

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2011/09/08102006/0>

Christie Commission

http://www.unison-scotland.org.uk/briefings/b005_PolicyBrief_ChristieCommission_on%20PublicServices_June2011.pdf



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