

Scottish Government Programme 2017-18

Introduction

The Scottish Government has published its programme for 2017-18. This sets out a revised legislative programme and other administrative actions. This briefing highlights the issues with greatest impact on UNISON members.

Politically, this is a response to the criticism that the government has not been focussed 'on the day job', sometimes described as a 'reset'. Most of last year's legislative programme has not yet been enacted, so current bills are largely as set out in last year's Briefing No.80.

Budget

The headline announcement from a UNISON perspective is the ending of the 1% pay cap. The programme says: "*Future pay policy will take account of the cost of living, continue to protect the lowest paid and ensure public sector budgets remain in balance.*" This is very welcome and is a positive response to our 'Pay Up Now!' campaign. There is a short stakeholder consultation on the shape of the new pay policy and service groups have been advised.

The other key issue for UNISON members is the funding of public services and this will also impact on the new pay policy. The programme is understandably light on this as half of the budget will depend on the UK Autumn Budget in late November/ December. The other half depends on the Scottish Government's use of its tax powers and there is to be a discussion paper on this. The Budget Bill will also set out how the 'cake' is to be divided. It remains to be seen if councils continue to take the brunt of austerity cuts and how they will respond to pressures on NHS and social care services in particular.

Education

While the government is currently consulting on its proposals for school reform, the programme gives a clear indication that it intends to proceed with its plans to create regional collaboratives and divert more spending and powers directly to schools. This is despite the overwhelmingly critical responses to the initial consultation.

There is further confirmation of the welcome expansion of early years provision. However, following the English voucher scheme, which is already in trouble, is not how we would deliver the policy

Climate Change

Probably the strongest element of the programme covers measures to tackle climate change. The phasing out of new petrol and diesel cars by 2032, investment in low emission vehicles, drink deposit schemes, active travel and low carbon infrastructure will be widely welcomed. The establishment of a Just Transition Commission is particularly welcome as is a public body bid for ScotRail.



POLICY BRIEFING

KEY POINTS:

- This new ScotGov programme sets out legislation and plans for the coming year.
- The current pay cap ends.
- Budget decisions are still to be made.
- Current public service reform plans will continue in health and education.
- New plans for tackling climate change and poverty.



Contact UNISON's Bargaining & Campaigns team:

Dave Watson
d.watson@unison.co.uk

0141 342 2819
08000 857857

Local Government Reform

Last year's programme made reference to local government reform and that has now been developed into 'a comprehensive review of how local decisions are made and how local democracy is working'. There will also be more support for Community Choices and participatory budgeting.

There will be a Planning Bill to implement the reforms already consulted on, which will have implications for members. They will 'urgently' respond to the Barclay report on business rates.

There is a major emphasis on growing the economy, including a welcome commitment to a Scottish National Investment Bank. A 'Strategic Board' will provide an oversight of economic development agencies including SDS.

Health and Social Care

The programme confirms current strategies on prevention and a shift from acute to community services. New commitments include extending free personal care to the u65's (Frank's Law) and confirmation of the NHS Safe Staffing Bill. There will be a 'soft opt-out' for organ and tissue donation.

Social Security and Poverty

The programme mostly confirms the current plans to establish a social security agency and process measures in the Child Poverty Bill. There is a new commitment to provide free sanitary products in schools and colleges as well as Basic Income Scheme pilot projects.

The Warm Homes Bill will include a new statutory target, after last year's was missed, and fuel efficiency measures in the private sector. The 50,000 new homes target is retained along with new funding to eradicate rough sleeping and tackle drug abuse in response to recent worrying trends.

Justice

Extending the presumption against short sentences from 3 to 12 months will be criticised, but there is a strong evidential base for a greater move to community based sentencing and substantial savings. Pardons for same-sex activity that should never have been criminalised are also welcome.

There is a general commitment to 'protect the frontline police budget and support the implementation of the Policing 2026 Strategy'. This needs to recognise that police officers in civilian specialist roles are not Best Value.

Brexit

In line with the political strategy, matters constitutional come at the end of the programme. There is a continuing focus on the impact of Brexit and EU Withdrawal Bill, with its implications for devolved powers, together with a pitch for additional powers on immigration and employment rights, which UNISON Scotland supports.

Conclusion

There is much in this programme that reflects UNISON's policy asks. Most of the substance in the programme continues current plans and there are few radical policy shifts that should alarm UNISON members. Those 'policy developments' are mostly positive, such as on public sector pay. There is also a willingness to adopt proposals from other parties in an obvious attempt to build a consensus in a hung parliament.

The challenges will be in turning many of the consultative processes into substantive action. As will providing the resources required to address Scotland's deep rooted challenges - including inequality, health, demographic change and public service delivery.

Further info

The full programme
(124 pages)

<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0052/00524214.pdf>

The summary version

<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0052/00524209.pdf>

Briefing 80 on last year's plan as most is yet to be enacted

<http://www.unison-scotland.org/2016/09/06/scottish-government-plan-2016-17/>

UK legislation in our Queen's speech briefing

<http://www.unison-scotland.org/2017/06/22/queens-speech/>



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team:

Dave Watson
d.watson@unison.co.uk

0141 342 2811
0800 0 857 857