

Scottish Government budget – Greens agree deal with SNP

With provisions for free school meals, pay and the environment, The Scottish Government has struck a deal with the Scottish Green Party to ensure sufficient votes to pass the budget through The Scottish Parliament.

Finance Secretary Kate Forbes has agreed a pact which guarantees the Budget Bill can clear its final stages. It will include the phased introduction of free school meals for all primary pupils, an enhanced public sector pay deal, new Pandemic Support Payments and additional funding to support environmental, active travel and energy efficiency initiatives.

Talks are continuing ahead of tomorrow's Stage 3 debate with the Scottish Liberal Democrats, who voted for the budget at Stage 1 in exchange for increased spending on mental health, business support and education recovery. Scottish Labour have set out their demands and continue to negotiate with the government.

The government says these new commitments build on the budget's existing measures to address the challenges of the ongoing pandemic and lay the foundations for recovery. They include meeting a demand from Scottish business by extending 100% rates relief for the retail, hospitality, leisure,

aviation and newspaper sectors for a further 12 months, and supporting families by allocating money for a council tax freeze and providing record £16 billion to the NHS.

EDINBURGH

Here in Edinburgh the council has agreed to freeze council tax and also council rents. The council tax freeze is not fully funded by the government, and councillors have said that it will cost the city £5 million.

More than 200,000 additional primary school children will receive free school meals, including over 17,300 in City of Edinburgh, over 4,900 in East Lothian, over 4,400 in Midlothian, and over 8,800 in West Lothian.

Free school meals provision will be expanded to all primary children by next summer, phased in on a timetable agreed with local councils, and ensure that those currently eligible get free meals throughout the school holidays. At this point all children in P1 to P3 receive free school meals and this will be expanded to P4 in August 2021. By August 2022 all primary school children will receive free school meals with £49.5m which has been allocated to fund this this year, and £112m next year.

Scottish Greens Lothian MSP Alison Johnstone said: "I am absolutely delighted that our budget deal ensures that all primary school children will receive free school meals from the summer of 2022, with p4 pupils getting them from this summer and p5 from January."

"I know this news will be welcomed by the families who will benefit from this forward-thinking policy. Knowing that every primary school child will benefit from a healthy meal every day will make a huge difference to families' finances and wellbeing."

The new initiatives will be funded mainly from the unallocated balance of funding from last week's UK budget.

They include:

Pandemic Support Payments of £130 to households receiving Council Tax Reduction and two payments of £100 to families of children qualifying for free school meals

the phased introduction of free school meals to all primary school children by August 2022

an £800 pay rise for public sector workers earning up to £25,000, and a 2% increase for those earning over £25,000 up to £40,000

extending free bus travel to under 22s

£40 million to support the green recovery, including a further £15 million for active travel, £10 million for energy efficiency, £10 million for biodiversity and £5 million for agri-environmental measures



Scottish Parliament Holyrood. Kate Forbes MSP Finance Secretary in parliament on Tuesday 26 May 2020. Picture FRASER BREMNER

Ms Forbes said: "We continue to face unprecedented challenges and I have sought to engage constructively to deliver a budget that meets the needs of the nation.

"I would like to thank all parties for the positive way they have participated in this process. The budget addresses key issues raised by every party and I hope all MSPs feel able to support it. We have reached an agreement with the Scottish Greens and I am hopeful about the outcome of my continuing talks with the Liberal Democrats.

"Today I can announce that we are able to go further in offering a fair and affordable pay settlement to the public

sector workers to whom we owe so much through the pandemic, particularly the lowest paid.

“The budget already contains measures to help struggling families, but in this deal we are also announcing details of a £100 million programme of one-off Pandemic Support Payments. And we commit to providing free school meals to every primary school pupil by August 2022, with expansion for P4s starting after this year’s summer holidays.

“A green recovery lies at the heart of the Scottish Government’s policies and today we are delivering significant new investments in energy efficiency and active travel, while providing additional funding to support biodiversity and make our agriculture more environmentally-friendly.

“And, as we rebuild from Covid, we will support our young people by extending our original commitment to concessionary travel for all under 19s to include everyone up to age 22, giving all 18-21 year olds free bus travel.

“Every penny made available to us to tackle the pandemic has been allocated. These remain difficult times, but this budget puts us on the path to a fairer, greener and more prosperous Scotland.”

Copies of the correspondence between the two parties are here.

SCOTTISH GREEN PARTY

Scottish Greens co-leader Patrick Harvie said: “The Scottish Greens have been clear that the Scottish budget needed to do more to tackle rising poverty and ensure a green recovery from the pandemic.

“I’m delighted that once again our constructive approach has delivered real results for the people who need it most. The COVID household relief payment will direct money to those households who have struggled in this crisis, providing

funding for essential supplies.

“We’ve also been clear that school meals can be a vital tool in tackling child poverty. Marcus Rashford has brought the campaign for meals during the school holidays to the forefront, and I’m proud that Green MSPs have won that in Scotland, and universal free school meals for all primary kids by next summer.

“Concessionary bus travel for young people is a game changer, opening up opportunities for families and young people, and promoting public transport use for a whole generation.

“And after the insult of a public sector pay freeze from the UK budget, I’m proud that the Greens have secured an uplift for the workers who have been and still are on the front line of our efforts to tackle this public health crisis. We will continue to back further progress, for example in the imminent NHS Scotland pay review.

“We have also won commitments to sow the seeds of a green recovery, with more funding to embed cycling and walking infrastructure and protect Scotland’s nature. We’ve been clear that the efficiency of homes needs to be improved, and that farmers need more support to lower emissions.

“This year’s budget cements the impact the Scottish Greens have had on Scotland’s priorities over the last five years. From fairer taxes to local services, we’ve shown every year that Green MSPs will get things done to build a fairer and greener Scotland.”

SCOTTISH LABOUR

Anas Sarwar today said Labour MSPs will back The Scottish Government’s budget if it delivers a fair deal for social care workers. Ahead of the stage three vote on Tuesday, Scottish Labour has offered to support the budget if it includes an increase in social care workers’ pay to £12-an-hour with a

process to raise this to £15 in the next parliament.

The median wage for care workers across the UK is currently £9.50-an-hour, and a pay rise would benefit as many as 200,000 people in Scotland who have contributed so much during the pandemic.

A recent survey conducted by the GMB union revealed that 98 per cent of social care workers feel underpaid, and 52 per cent regard themselves as undervalued by the Scottish Government.

Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar said: "Our dedicated NHS and social care workers have contributed so much during the pandemic.

"Their efforts have saved lives and ensured the most vulnerable in our communities have been cared for, which goes to the very heart of a compassionate society.

"We applauded them and now it's time to recognise and reward them with a fair pay deal in this year's budget.

"So I am making a clear offer to the Scottish Government: deliver a fair pay rise for social care workers and we will vote for the budget.

"And then let's spend the next parliament working on a recovery plan to rebuild Scotland."