

Government sets out priorities for this parliamentary session

ON Wednesday at Holyrood, The Scottish Government set out its programme of legislation.

First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said that Scotland's recovery from the coronavirus pandemic will be driven by a programme to build a modern, high-tech economy while being mindful of the values of fairness and compassion. Outlining her priorities for government to Parliament, she added that tackling the pandemic remained the immediate priority but people in Scotland should have the right to decide their future when the current crisis has passed.

In addition to vaccinating all adults in Scotland, the Government's plan for its first hundred days includes publishing a NHS Recovery Plan to achieve a 10% increase in inpatient, day case, and outpatient activity for those who had treatment or care postponed due to Covid-19.

The First Minister also announced the completion of a £12 million investment to take the East Ayrshire Community Hospital into full NHS ownership, as part of the Government's plan to invest £10 billion in the NHS estate over the next five years.

Consultation on legislation to establish a National Care Service will also begin in the first hundred days with the aim of introducing legislation in the first year of Parliament, and the service to be operational by the end of this parliament, as one of its most important and enduring legacies.

Continuing the Government's focus on education and young

people, from August all three and four-year-olds, and many two-year-olds, will be eligible for more than 1,100 hours of free childcare a year and free healthy breakfasts and lunches will also be made available to all primary 4 children in Scotland as a further step towards extension to all primary school children.

Recognising the importance of economic recovery, the First Minister said that the Government would continue its support for specific business sectors such as food and tourism, and establish a Rural Entrepreneur Fund to support Scotland's rural economy.

Ahead of COP26 this winter in Glasgow, the government will publish an indicative national defined contribution – setting out how Scotland will become a net-zero nation by 2045 – and introduce legislation to make bus travel free for people under the age of 22.

The First Minister said that that she looked forward to working across the Chamber, and believed this Parliament would be “the most important in our devolved history”.

Speaking in the Chamber the First Minister said: “The plans I have set out today are unashamedly ambitious. We will tackle the COVID crisis as our immediate priority. We will lead by example in addressing the climate crisis. We will create a National Care Service, to match the post-war National Health Service. We will widen opportunities for young people.

“We will build a modern, high-tech economy, while staying true to enduring values of fairness and compassion. We will seek a better politics. And we will put Scotland's future in Scotland's hands.

“Our programme is rooted in today's reality. But it also shows the way to a brighter tomorrow.”

Political response

Scottish Liberal Democrat leader Willie Rennie said: “The First Minister promised this would be a parliament focused on recovery and she would defer a referendum until the effects of the pandemic were over.

“I’m disappointed to see the First Minister announce plans which would push the recovery aside.

“She has re-announced a host of commitments that her government has failed to deliver in their last three terms in power.

“The emerging Green pact is a sign that independence is the overriding priority. It appears they have even swept aside their fundamental differences on oil and gas to smooth the path to a referendum.

“I’ve worked closely with ministers over the last 16 months to help get the country through the pandemic and to agree extra funds for mental health and education. We will continue to hunt for agreement with others.

“It’s important that patients don’t wait longer than twelve weeks for NHS treatment, young people get mental health treatment within eighteen weeks, that we save more people from death from drugs and the poverty related attainment gap is closed completely in schools. All these major issues must be delivered before the government presses for another referendum.”