

Scottish Government publishes Programme for Government

The First Minister spoke to The Scottish Parliament for around half an hour introducing the Programme for Government without any interventions from the opposition parties.

Nicola Sturgeon explained the backdrop to the new Programme, reiterating that The Scottish Government's hands are tied by the fact that they do not have the necessary levers to raise finance in Scotland, and that those powers are reserved to Westminster.

This means that the budget agreed when inflation was two per cent is now outdated as inflation hits 10 per cent or more.

Ms Sturgeon also explained that this is the most severe cost crisis in our lifetime and will pose a danger to livelihoods and lives. She also suggested that the crisis required action on a scale similar to the Covid response, asking for the UK Government under its new Prime Minister to freeze energy bills – which she said was essential but would not be enough on its own.

But notwithstanding these constraints, and saying that there was no unallocated pot of extra money, the First Minister announced a freeze on rail fares until March 2023 (an extension of two months as any rises in fares would usually be made in early January). Opposition leaders including Anas

Sarwar and Alex Cole Hamilton of the Scottish Liberal Democrats pointed out that this comes on the heels of a massive rise in fares earlier this year.

Ms Sturgeon also announced a freeze in rents until March 2023 and that this would come into effect from today.

The programme makes this provision to protect tenants: “We recognise the huge pressures the cost crisis is placing on households, and the particular issues that will be faced by many people who rent their home. Given the UK Government has not as yet provided sufficient support in response to the cost crisis, we are looking at all action we can take within devolved powers to support people in Scotland. As part of this we intend to introduce emergency legislation to protect tenants by freezing rents and imposing a moratorium on evictions until at least 31 March 2023. We also intend to act to prevent immediate rent increases.”

The government will also increase the Scottish Child Payment to £25 per week per eligible child. By their own calculations there will be a total of around 400,000 children who may be eligible for the increased payment. The Scottish Government also highlighted in the Programme document that this benefit has increased by 150% in just eight months.

Free school meals will be rolled out to children in Primaries 6 and 7 as well as younger children, but Scottish Conservative Leader, Douglas Ross suggested this was old news which ought to have been implemented last year.

In other news the First Minister promised to introduce the Deposit return scheme by next August – something which was to have been in place already.

The First Minister said: “This Programme for Government is published in the context of the most severe cost crisis in many of our lifetimes. It is a crisis pushing millions into poverty and poses a genuine danger, not just to livelihoods,

but to lives.

“The Scottish Government is already committed to a range of measures, worth almost £3 billion this year, that will help with rising costs. But the magnitude of what is being experienced by people and businesses means that mitigation is nowhere near sufficient. What is needed now is action on a scale similar to the initial Covid response.

“Regrettably, the powers to act in the manner and on the scale needed do not lie with this Parliament. In my view, they should lie here. If they did, we could have acted already. But they don’t. These powers are reserved to Westminster.

“The cost crisis means this Programme for Government is more focussed than ever before – deliberately so – with priority actions to provide help now.

“To that end we will provide more help for people who may be at risk of self-rationing or even self-disconnection from their energy supply and we will double the Fuel Insecurity Fund to £20 million this year.

“We will also propose emergency legislation to put in place a rent freeze until at least March and a moratorium on evictions.

“Given the powers to act in the manner and on the scale needed do not lie with this Parliament, this Programme for Government also provides for a Scottish Independence Referendum Bill. Independence would give us – like it does other independent countries – the levers we desperately need to respond to a crisis such as this. That’s the prize we surely must grasp.”

TOURIST TAX

But as far as Edinburgh is concerned the big news is that The Scottish Government will introduce a discretionary power for councils to implement Tourist Tax – something which Edinburgh

is ready to introduce almost immediately, creating a ring-fenced fund which would for example keep public areas with high tourist footfall clean for everyone.

Council Leader Cammy Day welcomed today's announcement that The Scottish Government intends to introduce a bill to give councils the powers to introduce the visitor levy.

The council has long campaigned for the powers to introduce a levy – which would see overnight visitors pay a small additional charge on their accommodation – and has produced a substantial body of work to back its case. This included a [detailed consultation in 2018](#), which saw 85% of the 2,500 respondents expressing strong support for its introduction. This figure included a majority of Edinburgh-based businesses and accommodation providers.

It was estimated then that a levy in Edinburgh could raise in the region of £15 million per year to invest in sustainable tourism and managing the impact of tourism on the city.

Council Leader Cammy Day said: “This is fantastic news for the city, and a landmark step following years of work here in the Capital to make the case for a visitor levy – something that's common practice in other major cities and destinations across the world.

“We're very proud to be one of the world's most popular visitor destinations, but we're equally aware that this success comes at a cost. That's why we believe it's right to ask visitors to make a small contribution to help us sustain and improve our tourism offer while managing its impact.

“We've been building the case for Edinburgh to become the first city in the UK to introduce such a levy, consistently and repeatedly making the case to Scottish Ministers without success – until now. From our citywide consultation held in 2018, our proposals gained overwhelming backing from Edinburgh's residents, businesses and attractions – and,

importantly, also from the majority of accommodation providers.

“Ultimately the income this generates will help us continue to invest in and manage the success of tourism on our city, making sure we continue to offer one of the most enviable and enjoyable visitor experiences in the world – while bringing new and additional benefits to our residents who live and work here all year round.

“We acknowledge, of course, that this has been an extremely challenging period for our culture and hospitality industries and are fully committed to working together with them, the wider tourism industry and other partners to co-produce a scheme that works best for the whole of our Capital city.

“I’ll be pushing the Scottish Government hard to ensure that any income generated is in addition to our block grant funding – not instead of it – and that we’re in a position to benefit from this as soon as possible.”

SCOTTISH GREENS

The Scottish Greens welcomed the First Minister’s announcement of a rent freeze and an eviction ban until at least March, which they say will provide “vital stability and support” for tenants across Scotland at a time when many are suffering.

The Scottish Greens Housing spokesperson, Ariane Burgess MSP said: “Improving tenants rights and tackling inequality are at the heart of the cooperation agreement that we agreed with the Scottish Government and must be at the heart of our recovery.

“With soaring inflation, skyrocketing bills and increasing rents, these are desperate times for tenants all across Scotland.

“We are facing the biggest social emergency for decades. The rent freeze and eviction ban that the First Minister announced

will provide vital stability and support for tenants across Scotland at a time when many are suffering. It is one of the steps we are taking, in partnership with the Scottish Government, to mitigate the damage being done by Downing Street and the energy companies.

“Over the course of this parliamentary term Scotland will see the biggest expansion of tenants rights since devolution, with more rights for tenants to make a house a home by keeping pets and decorating, better protections from eviction and, perhaps most importantly, a robust system of rent controls.”



Douglas Ross MSP after leaving the chamber when he unusually took interventions from the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister

SCOTTISH CONSERVATIVES

Scottish Conservative Leader Douglas Ross said: “The global cost-of-living crisis is as big a challenge to the Scottish people as the Covid pandemic. It must be treated with the same seriousness by our governments.

“In a time of emergency, governments must focus on what they need to do, rather than what they wish to do for political purposes. They must govern for our whole country, not just for their supporters.

“Unfortunately, this programme falls woefully short of rising to the big challenges we face.

“The Prime Minister has changed, but sadly it’s the same First Minister directing blame elsewhere and seeking grievance with the UK Government.

“Both governments need to do more to tackle the cost of living crisis. But there’s no doubt the SNP are not delivering their side of the deal.

“When Scottish people are struggling with their bills, instead of the right level of help, they’ll get another unwanted bill from the SNP Government – an Indyref2 Bill.

“This SNP Government are giving precedence to planning for a vote on separation, which they know will divide Scotland at exactly the point we should be coming together and uniting. A vote that is the wrong priority at the worst possible time.

“The Scottish Conservatives have published our own plan for the year ahead in this Parliament, focused on five key priorities. On supporting families and households through the cost-of-living crisis. Working with businesses to grow the Scottish economy. Rebuilding our public services after the damage of the Covid pandemic. Empowering every community to recover. And building a better Scotland for the next

generation.

“Those are the people’s priorities – and in this time of national crisis, they are the right priorities for Scotland.”



Scottish Labour leader, Anas Sarwar after making his response to the Programme for Government in the chamber

SCOTTISH LABOUR

Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar said these are serious times and serious debate is needed. He said he would like rail fares to be halved to help everyone. He continued: “Scotland needed a Programme for Government that recognised the scale of the challenge facing our country.

“The cost of living crisis is a national emergency on the scale of the pandemic – and dealing with it requires both of Scotland’s governments to move quickly.

“It is why Labour published an Emergency Cost of Living Act, detailing just some of the measures we could take right now here in Scotland.

“As I said on the day we published our plans, I don’t care about who claims credit for any changes that are implemented, I’m more interested in families getting the support they need right now.

“So in that spirit, I want to welcome the change of heart from the SNP and the Greens when it comes to rent freezes.

“But there is more that this government can do.

“For almost a year now the Labour Party has been demanding action on the cost of living crisis.

“From the windfall tax, to the energy price freeze and a rent freeze -we have been setting the agenda from opposition.

“And after 15 years it is hard to give this government the benefit of the doubt.

“Change will only come when the First Minister decides to end the culture where every failure comes with a ready-made excuse. It is always someone else’s fault.

“No one will be surprised by the inclusion of a referendum bill today, but they will be frustrated by the waste of money and resources.

“Under this government’s watch there is a crisis in our NHS. There are more than 700,000 Scots on an NHS waiting list – that is 1 in 8 Scots waiting for appointments and treatment. More than 9,000 children and young people are waiting for a mental health appointment.

“There is a crisis in education. The promise to feed every child in Scotland’s primary schools broken, the attainment gap refusing to close, and money cut from schools in the poorest

communities.

“And there is a crisis in our communities – the highest drug deaths in Europe, a quarter of children living in poverty and £6 billion cut from council budgets since 2014.

“Politics is about choices.

“Today I want to welcome some moves the First Minister has made in the right direction but it is not enough – and we will need to go further as this crisis continues.

“This cannot be just another Programme for Government that goes through the motions of promising change and delivers nothing.

“First Minister, use your power and use your status to change people’s lives and improve Scotland now.”

SCOTTISH LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

Scottish Liberal Democrat leader Alex Cole-Hamilton said: “It’s disappointing to see the First Minister give the impression that the Scottish Government have responded to this crisis to the sum of £3bn, when Parliament’s independent experts have debunked that and pointed out that includes policies that date back to the Lib-Lab coalition.

“And on rail, having already hiked fares 4% this year, today’s promise amounts to a two-month delay on further price hikes. When you look at the investment going on across Europe, that’s embarrassing.

“It is clear that after more than 15 years in power, this is a government that lacks the humility, the creativity and ambition necessary to solve the problems the people of Scotland currently face.

“This is a meagre programme. Nothing new for health when a

staggering one in seven Scots is on a waiting list, nothing on long Covid, nothing significant to boost the economy despite the country's slide towards recession.

"It continues to astonish me that the SNP have used this summer to focus solely on their efforts break up the United Kingdom

"Meanwhile wasteful spending continues. The First Minister should abandon the costly ministerial power grab of social care, scrap national testing and stop spending her time and our money on a referendum that is not wanted by the people of Scotland.

"This is a programme for a winter of discontent."

FRIENDS OF THE EARTH

Friends of the Earth Scotland head of campaigns Mary Church said:

"There is a welcome recognition in the Programme for Government that the cost of living crisis and the climate emergency are interconnected but the action to mitigate their impacts and tackle their root causes falls far short of what is needed. One year on from COP26 in Glasgow, the Scottish Government's fine rhetoric has not turned into the transformative action needed to drive change across transport, housing and energy.

"The Scottish Government must use its forthcoming energy strategy to spell out how it will secure a rapid and fair transition away from the fossil fuels which are driving both crises within the next decade. By transforming our energy system to run on reliable, affordable renewable energy we can future proof our lives against further damage from volatile fossil fuels.

"The energy strategy must focus on demand reduction, energy

efficiency and renewables, which can deliver decent green jobs in Scotland instead of fantasy techno-fixes like hydrogen and carbon capture. The Scottish Government has admitted that these speculative negative emission technologies won't be able to deliver this decade so it's hard to see why it continues to throw time and resources at the fossil fuel industry's pipe dreams.

TRAIN FARE FREEZE

"The freeze on ScotRail fares demonstrates how public ownership can keep fares from getting even higher, benefiting passengers and helping support the necessary shift away from cars. While the fare freeze is welcome, the Scottish Government should be going further and actually reducing fares to help more people leave the car behind.

CIRCULAR ECONOMY

"We saw the same promise to introduce a Circular Economy Bill 12 months ago, it must be delivered this time. Consumption targets to reduce both Scotland's carbon footprint and material footprints need to be at the heart of the Circular Economy Bill to create real change.

HUMAN RIGHTS BILL

"It's disappointing that the Human Rights Bill that would enshrine the right to a healthy and safe environment in Scots Law has been kicked into the long grass. This is a vital piece of legal protection for people and nature that should not be delayed any further nor cannot it be allowed to become a political football in the constitutional debate."

The Programme for Government is published [here](#) on The Scottish Parliament website and is reproduced below. A debate follows the introduction of the document on which the SNP-Green coalition will move forward in the next year.



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