

# Briefing on ...

# Legislative Programme 2007/08

## Programme for Scotland

### Introduction

The Scottish Government has published *Principles and Priorities: The Government's Programme for Scotland*. This sets out the legislative programme for the coming year together with the government's strategic priorities. This briefing highlights the key points of interest to UNISON Scotland.

### Legislative Programme

This is by any standards a light and generally uncontroversial legislative programme that reflects the parliamentary reality for a minority government. The First Minister argues "most people already believe there is too much legislation and yearn for a more considered and more restricted approach. I embrace that sense of legislative restraint". There are 11 government Bills in total. This may be supplemented by Non-Executive Bills promoted by other parties and individual MSP's who can build a parliamentary consensus around an issue.

### Budget Bill

From UNISON's perspective this will be the most important Bill in the programme. The legislation gives the Scottish Government authority to spend money in 2008/09. The Scottish Government will have to await the UK Comprehensive Spending Review (CSR) before it can be clear on the size of the budget next year. It will then publish its own Strategic Spending Review setting out how it intends to allocate the budget. In particular UNISON will want to see how the Government's spending commitments impact on local government.

### Local Healthcare Bill

Patients and the public will be encouraged to have a greater involvement in the delivery of local healthcare services by introducing direct elections to NHS boards. A consultation on the bill is to be launched in the autumn which will set out the approach in more detail. UNISON Scotland welcomes this announcement as we supported the Non-Executive Bill promoted by Bill Butler MSP on this issue in the last session.

### Abolition of Bridge Tolls Bill

The bill will scrap charges on the Forth and Tay bridges as the only remaining toll bridges in Scotland. This has already been agreed in principle by Parliament and will be welcomed by many UNISON members who have to use these bridges, whilst recognising the staffing consequences will need to be addressed.

### Rape and Sexual Offences Bill

This will implement a Scottish Law Commission report that is likely to recommend introducing an "active" model of consent. This places a responsibility on all parties to ensure that any sexual activity is fully consensual as well as widening the definition of rape and introducing an offence of "sexual assault".

### Culture Bill

The Scottish Arts Council and Scottish Screen will be merged to form a new cultural development body, Creative Scotland, together with a statutory remit to promote an understanding and enjoyment of the arts and culture. UNISON had a number of concerns over the draft Bill and will want to look carefully at the new proposals.

### Graduate Endowment (Abolition) Bill

Scrapping the £2,000 graduate endowment fee benefiting some 50,000 current students.

### Public Health Bill

A raft of measures to improve public health protection will be brought in, while giving officials more powers to respond to threats. Already the subject of a consultation paper.

### Judiciary Bill

The bill aims to modernise the organisation and leadership of Scotland's judiciary by giving it greater power over the Scottish Court Service and putting arrangements for the Judicial Appointments Board on a statutory footing.

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### **Interest Bill**

This aims to develop fair rules for the application of interest rates to payments of debt and damages by bringing in a right to claim interest, from the time when a sum of money becomes due by one person to another. Certain categories of debt will be exempt from interest including utility debts and rent arrears to public sector landlords.

### **Flooding Bill**

Updating existing laws to cover all aspects of flood management in Scotland. There will be a consultation covering how to fund small-scale defences locally, improve flood risk information and ensure that management plans are produced for all high-risk areas. Could be implications for UNISON members in Scottish Water, SEPA and local authorities.

### **Glasgow Commonwealth Games Bill**

Legislation required to support the 2014 commonwealth games, should the Glasgow bid be successful, and to protect the event from ambush marketing. There are implications primarily for UNISON members in Trading Standards and is the subject of a current consultation paper.

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## **Strategic Priorities**

The paper also sets out the Scottish Government's strategic priorities for the coming year. In some cases this means a consultation paper or other action short of legislation. The main items of interest to UNISON include:

- Freeze council tax at 2007-08 levels and begin detailed consultation on proposals to replace council tax with a local income tax and reduce or remove the rates for small businesses. This has huge and potentially damaging financial consequences for local government.
- A number of references to efficiency but no mention of the outstanding strategy responses needed to give staff confidence in the processes.
- Publish a housing consultation paper including the provision of affordable housing and support for first-time buyers. UNISON will welcome this particularly if it includes support for local authority provision.
- Seek to simplify the public sector delivery landscape including proposals on enterprise, regeneration, skills and the environment quangos. UNISON will be particularly interested in the proposed skills strategy and the role of Careers Scotland and how the Government proposes to meet its manifesto commitment to align the service more closely to education.
- On health consult on a Patients' Rights Bill including the right to an individual waiting time guarantee. Plus welcome proposals to phase out prescription charges and increase the number of school nurses. A comprehensive health strategy will be published by the end of the year addressing a number of important public health measures.
- Increasing policing capacity through the deployment of the equivalent of 1,000 additional police officers. UNISON will argue that this should include recognition of the role of other police staffs and the need to properly fund the provision of Community Wardens.
- Consult on legislative proposals to introduce a mandatory emissions reduction target of 80% by 2050, low-carbon buildings, increasing energy efficiency and a strategy for increasing recycling and other measures to move towards a zero-waste society. UNISON would support this as part of a comprehensive Climate Change Bill that recognises the importance of the workplace in addressing climate chaos.
- In education begin working on the development of a long term and comprehensive early years strategy and pilot free school meals for all primary 1 to 3 children in selected local authority areas. A fostering and kinship care strategy and support to vulnerable children. All welcome proposals to UNISON as long as the Government recognises that education delivery requires the commitment of all staff involved in education.
- Examining the Emergency Workers Act, with a view to enhancing the protection provided and extending it to vulnerable health workers and primary care staff. UNISON would prefer something a little more proactive and the EWA should be extended to a wider range of workers than those listed here.

Disappointingly there is no mention of proposals on alternatives to PPP although we understand work is ongoing on this issue.

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### **Further Information**

The full programme document along with more details on each Bill can be viewed at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Government/legislative-programme>

There will be further UNISON briefings on the issues covered in the programme as proposals