

Another budget u-turn after SNP 'falls asleep at wheel' on business rates

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21 Feb 2017



Finance secretary Derek Mackay has performed another budget u-turn as he seeks to address Scotland's business rates crisis.

Addressing Holyrood today, he said up to £40 million had been discovered within a budget that had previously been "maxed out".

It means some sectors in certain areas of the country will have their increases capped at 12.5 per cent, although many others will still have to endure the crippling increases.

Mr Mackay eventually conceded to MSPs that the cap would only be in place for one year, a move described as a "sticking plaster approach" by the Scottish Conservatives.

It's another surprise discovery of cash by the finance secretary, after he found more than £180 million to appease the Greens in budget negotiations earlier this month.

Scottish Conservative shadow finance secretary Murdo Fraser said:

"For weeks the SNP has been ignoring this issue, claiming it had no control over this process.

"In the typical style of this SNP government, it fell asleep at the wheel and only woke up when it crashed into the wall.

"We've heard on more than one occasion that this budget has been maxed out, yet once again Mr Mackay has been able to find a bit more money down the back of the couch.

"It's a desperate eleventh-hour move which will do very little to ease concerns within Scotland's business community, given that it is for one year only."

Finance secretary Derek Mackay only made the statement to the Scottish Parliament after demands by the Scottish Conservatives:

News story: Civil news: tips to help you when submitting VHCC family work

From:

First published:

21 February 2017

You can prevent delays to Very High Cost Case family work by making sure you avoid a few common mistakes.

We have checked through correspondence received by the VHCC family team in recent weeks and believe the following tips could help you avoid unnecessary delays.

Avoid sending documents by both email and DX

This often causes confusion and additional work for the team, meaning that it takes longer for them to issue a response.

Unless otherwise requested choose just one way of sending documents i.e. email or DX.

Download and use the template to register a VHCC case

As you work through the registration template remember that the VHCC team requires the following:

- certificate reference numbers
- number of hearing days and advocate meetings to date
- number of future hearing days/advocate meetings
- date of final hearing (if known)
- full breakdown of costs to date

If information is missing the VHCC team will need to ask for additional information, which will mean delays. A link to the page hosting the template is available below.

Use correct process for enquiries

Enquiries about cases managed within CCMS need to be dealt with in the CCMS environment. Non-CCMS cases enquiries can be dealt with by emailing:

vhcc.queries@legalaid.gsi.gov.uk

Avoid emailing caseworkers directly as this can cause unnecessary delays.

Further information

[Family high cost cases](#) – scroll down to ‘when a case becomes high cost’ for link to ‘email template’ to help you register your VHCC case

Green MEP launches post-Brexit agriculture reports and calls for ‘green tape’ as Leadsom attacks ‘red tape’



21 February 2017

Green MEP Molly Scott Cato, a member of the European Parliament’s Agriculture Committee, has launched [two reports](#) on ideas for the future of farming post-Brexit. The launch comes on the day the [National Union of Farmers begin their annual conference](#) in Birmingham, where Defra Secretary, Andrea Leadsom, again [attacked the EU](#) for ‘tying farmers up in red tape’. She also called for a system based on simpler, more effective rules, where farmers will be ‘free to grow more, sell more and export more.’

However, Ms Leadsom offered farmers [no clear plan on farming post-Brexit](#) and Dr Scott Cato says that [questions to the government](#) reveal they lack ideas on the future of farming after the UK leaves the EU.

The two reports – one by the [Soil Association](#); the other by Simon Fairlie of the [Land Workers’ Alliance](#) – foresee a future where policies put soil health and biodiversity first, and where the way we use land helps tackle climate change. They say that to achieve this, farmers will need to receive at least as much money as they currently get through the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP). Molly Scott Cato said:

“Like Ms Leadsom, I don’t want farmers tied up in red tape, but we do need to bind ourselves in some green tape. We need to ensure land management protects and improves our soils, encourages biodiversity, and helps tackle climate change. The reports I have launched today contain a wealth of ideas on how we can achieve this.

“They also call for direct payments based on land area to be scrapped; instead future payments would to be based on paying farmers for the public

benefits they provide and for protecting the environment.

“With the government planning to remove us from the single market where around 65% of total UK agricultural exports are sold, platitudes about growing more, selling more and exporting more will ring hollow for most farmers.

“These reports show how to move UK agriculture away from a dependence on export markets and towards creating thriving rural communities by supporting family farms and relocalising food production. Brexit could be a unique opportunity to move towards an ecologically and economically sustainable farming system, but the government seems determined to move us in the wrong direction.”

Dr Tom MacMillan, Director of Innovation at the Soil Association, said:

“We’re hearing a fair bit of consensus from farming, nature and public interest groups on the big principles for agricultural policy after we leave the CAP – that the public expect high standards on animal welfare, for example, and that public money should pay for public benefits. What’s missing are practical and inspiring ideas that seize the chance to make a better fist of it, and face up to monumental challenges like climate change. So we’ve tried to set out a few game-changing ideas in our report”.

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[Speech: David Davis: Estonia and the UK will remain close partners after Brexit](#)

Britain and Estonia share much in common. From our belief that healthcare should be offered to all, regardless of background, to the importance we place on the defence of western values and democracy.

And it is in that spirit of shared values and friendship that I come to Tallinn today.

The message I bring with me is a simple one – Britain will always prioritise the important relationship between our two nations, now more than ever as we seek a strong partnership with the EU even after we leave its institutions.

Our deep relationship extends back decades, starting during the War of

Independence in 1918 when the UK sent a Royal Navy flotilla to secure Estonia's freedom.

The British servicemen who gave their lives in that conflict are commemorated in the Estonian Defence Forces military cemetery in Tallinn.

And that strong military partnership continues today. Not only are we fully signed up members of NATO, but we are also two of only 5 countries that meet the spending target of 2% of GDP on defence.

Our troops fought together under the NATO banner in Afghanistan, and are now working together to defeat Daesh in Iraq and Syria.

And you need look no further for an indication of the importance Britain places on our relationship than the fact that in April this year, we will be deploying 800 UK troops to Tapa.

That collaboration will be of no less importance when we leave the European Union, because in the face of growing concern about the threat to security across the continent we must bolster our efforts to defend the western world.

So our servicemen and women will continue to work proudly alongside yours in the years ahead, providing vital reassurance and deterrence along NATO's eastern border.

But our relationship runs further than our important shared interests in defence.

Estonia is one of the top travel destinations in the world and last year around 115,000 tourists visited Estonia from the UK.

In that context, I understand that the 15,000 Estonians currently living in the UK want certainty about their rights once the UK leaves the EU. And while Estonians' existing rights are not affected the British government wants to get a deal done to secure long term rights quickly that protects the rights of all EU citizens living in the UK, and British citizens living in the EU. Indeed we would have liked to have come to such an agreement already, and have been clear it will be an absolute priority once formal negotiations begin.

It's in no one's interest to see any new barriers to trade. The UK is Estonia's 4th biggest export partner in services, and trade between our two nations is worth more than €1bn a year.

The UK is important for the Estonian start-up community. Many have their headquarters in London, including the Estonian-founded money transfer firm TransferWise.

So as the Prime Minister outlined last month, Britain is seeking a new, strong partnership with the European Union. A partnership that maintains the close relationship we have with member states and builds further on them.

That partnership is one that will be to our mutual benefit. We are absolutely

clear that we want the EU to succeed economically, politically and socially – and we want to remain a good friend and neighbour.

I'm confident that if we approach negotiations over the UK's exit and new partnership with the EU in a spirit of goodwill, we can deliver a positive outcome that works for all.

Estonia and the UK will remain close partners. And my message to you, as the first UK Cabinet minister to visit Estonia since the UK voted to leave the EU, is that our important relationship will not diminish after our exit. Indeed, it will grow stronger still.

Today's figures show the Government's debt still rising, seven years after the Tories started their austerity agenda – Peter Dowd

Peter

Dowd MP, Labour's Shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, commenting on today's ONS public sector finance figures, said:

"Today's figures show the Government's debt still rising, seven years after the Tories started their austerity agenda, and two years after they said they would balance the books.

"It's clear that their slash and burn approach to public spending has not only given us a crisis in NHS and social care but also failed as an approach to reducing Government debt.

"Labour's Fiscal Credibility Rule gives us a firm commitment to addressing the public finances while investing in our economy for the future as part of our programme to rebuild and transform Britain."