

67) SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT'S PROGRAMME for 2018 / 2019 - The latest in a series of articles by Iain Gregory of Caithness CAB

Last week Liz and I found ourselves staying in an ancient Inn south of London for our Goddaughters wedding. Lindsay's maternal family are from Wick, the paternal side are from Inverness and the Bridegroom is from Ireland. Wisely, the hotel arranged additional bar staff and a quite wonderful time was had by all. Apart from bashing my head on a beam inconsiderately placed far too low by a 14th Century joiner, and being given the cold shoulder on our return by two rather huffy cats (who had received five star attention from Florence in our absence), all went very well and everyone made it safely home.

After ploughing through hundreds of emails (ignoring any offering me a "free" PPI check) I have now had a chance to look at the Scottish Government's programme for 2018 / 2019 and it makes interesting reading. For a start Social Security Scotland is now in operation and I see that the first payments (Carers Allowance Supplement) will be made this month (£221 over and above the basic entitlement, paid twice a year). We have high hopes that – as functions transfer to SSS – we will see a distinct improvement in service delivery and hopefully a spot of humanity as well. Another excellent plan is that the government's joint commitment with COSLA to remove burial and cremation fees for those aged under 18 will be implemented by the end of 2018, and this will make a huge difference to families who have tragically lost a youngster.

Apparently £1m will be invested in an "Affordable Credit Fund", working with the Carnegie UK Trust, to reduce the 'poverty premium' that low-income households often have to pay (much higher interest rates). We will need to see how this is going to operate, but it has to be a big improvement on the "payday loans" to which many families have been driven. On that note I see that a certain lender - who used to have execrable adverts involving puppets – has come a major cropper, which means that less people will have to present at CCAB being pursued for unaffordable debts.

A couple of other planned measures may well impact on us as well – the plan is that ALL homes "will have access to superfast broadband by the end of 2021 with a £600m investment to make this happen", and a Rural Economy Action Plan will be developed, with measures to increase the numbers living and working in rural Scotland. Work on a crofting bill will be brought forward, and a "national islands plan" will be prepared in the year ahead - perhaps it is about time Caithness was treated as an "island" as well?

The Government plan to deliver a publicly-owned not-for-profit energy company by 2021 to support efforts to tackle fuel poverty, (which is very common in the far north) and will consult on their preferred model later this year, so perhaps, just perhaps, the "Big Six" energy firms will get a wake-up call at long last and we can access fairly priced energy – let's hope so.

There are numerous other proposals as well and, as always, CCAB will be keeping up to date with everything that might affect the people in Caithness and North Sutherland and stand ready to advise and assist so please get in touch