

ALEX'S STANDARD

**SERVING
CENTRAL
SCOTLAND**



Scottish Parliamentary Newsletter from Alex Neil MSP, Issue 6, November 2003

WELCOME



Friends,

Welcome to the latest edition of my Standard. This is the first issue since the election in May and plenty has been happening since then. As ever, I hope you find the Standard of some use and if there are any issues that you would like me to take up, or if you have any articles for us then please do not hesitate to get in touch with me or my office. Contact details can be found below.

*Best wishes,
Alex Neil MSP*

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UNEMPLOYMENT IN CENTRAL SCOTLAND

Unemployment in two of the four Local Authority areas in the Central Scotland Region is higher than the national rate. Scottish unemployment, according to the Labour Market Statistics out on the 15th October, sits at 6.7%, compared to 5.0% across the United Kingdom. In the Falkirk Council area unemployment is at 9.2% (representing roughly 7,000 people) and in North Lanarkshire it is 8.8% (around 14,000 people). In South Lanarkshire it is 6.0% (some 9,000 people). Only three council areas have a higher rate of unemployment than Falkirk and North Lanarkshire (Glasgow, Dundee and North Ayrshire).

The Scottish rate of employment is 73.2% (compared to a UK wide rate of 74.4%), whilst in East Ayrshire it is 69.1%. Both Falkirk and North Lanarkshire have lower employment rates than across Scotland too, with rates of 69.3% and 68.0% respectively. The only council area in Central Scotland with an above average rate of employment is South Lanarkshire, with a rate of 75%.

These figures are further exacerbated by the news that the Hoover Candy factory in Cambuslang is set to close resulting in the loss of 260 jobs. Coming so close on the tail of the closure of Chunghwa in Mossend and Boots in Airdrie it is yet another blow to Central Scotland and Lanarkshire in particular.

Alex Neil MSP has called for action to turnaround Central Scotland's unemployment rates as an immediate priority. New jobs are needed for the area to stimulate the economy and provide work for people.

An action plan for investment in the area is desperately required to arrest the economic decline and turn around the higher than average level of unemployment.

Central Scotland Unemployment Statistics:

	<u>Number Employed</u>	<u>%</u>	<u>Number Unemployed</u>	<u>%</u>
Scotland Wide -	2,317,000	73.2	170,000	6.7
E Ayrshire -	51,000	69.1	Sample size too small for reliable estimate	
Falkirk -	67,000	69.3	7,000	9.2
N Lanarkshire -	142,000	68.0	14,000	8.8
S Lanarkshire -	139,000	75.0	9,000	6.0

If you are a member of, or know of any organisation in the Central Scotland area who would like Alex Neil MSP to visit them please get in touch using the contact information on this page.

BENEFITS PAYMENT CHANGES

Alex has made clear his concerns at the changes to the way in which benefits will be paid out by the government in the future. The Department of Work and Pensions plan to gradually replace the current order book system with an electronic system of payment of all benefits, pensions and tax credits directly into bank accounts. Currently 41% who receive benefits get them paid directly into their bank account, with the majority, 59% preferring to collect them. In fact, 15% of benefit recipients do not have a bank account at all. Particularly concerning is the impact these changes may have on many of the elderly. Also of concern is the impact that these changes might have on local post offices.

Age Concern Scotland have made clear their great concern on the impact these proposed changes may have on the elderly. Many older folk don't use bank accounts like current accounts, and use them instead for the purpose of savings, and are thus unused to using bank accounts to access their disposable income.

There are also very real concerns that many local post offices will close, as many of them are reliant upon the income gained through collection of benefits and pensions. Local Post Offices are often the hub of their community, particularly in more remote locations. When post offices close in many of these areas the community is deeply affected.

ALEX SPEAKS UP FOR UNIVERSAL FREE SCHOOL MEALS

Alex Neil spoke in a debate in the Scottish Parliament on the 4th June about free school meals. The debate had been secured by the Scottish Executive to tidy up a loophole in London legislation that could have left thousands of children currently benefiting from free meals without them. Alex was speaking in favour of an amendment that sought to broaden out the scope of the debate to ensure that the growing child poverty rate is tackled through the free school meals system.

In the debate Alex spoke of his support for universal free school meals as a means to tackle incidences of malnutrition amongst Scotland's school children caused by an increasing rate of poverty amongst children. The government at Westminster promised when they took office six years ago that they would end child poverty in 20 years. They have 14 years left to go and far from having made a start on tackling child poverty there is evidence from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation to suggest that in fact it has grown in the period since. Universal free school meals would go a long way to attacking some of the effects of this poverty as well as removing the stigma often attached to kids by claiming free school meals. Moreover Alex believes it is right that every child, regardless of their means should be able to receive a decent meal every day.

As Alex said in the debate week, he does not necessarily believe that every benefit or service need be universal, but some absolutely have to be to meet their objectives and free school meals fit into this category. It is difficult to envisage politicians speaking out against the principles of universal education or universal state pensions so one may ask what the big difference with school meals is.

If you consider that children today who are not properly fed will grow up to be unhealthy adults tomorrow then you can start to begin to wonder at the cost to the health service as well as the overall level of health in the country, which as things stand is amongst the lowest in Europe. The appropriate question to ask, as far as Alex is concerned, should therefore not be can we afford to implement free school meals, but can we afford not to?

SCOTLAND'S TRANSPORT SYSTEM REQUIRES IMMEDIATE ATTENTION

Greater investment into public transport in Scotland is desperately needed to encourage people out of their cars and into trains and buses. Scotland's very prosperity is linked to our ability to move people, goods and services within our country and to access markets outwith our borders. However, public transport in Scotland has suffered from under-investment and as a consequence is expensive and often unreliable. The poor state of our transport system is directly linked to a poorer economic performance than Scotland is capable of. Furthermore it means that too many people are tied to their car, harming our environment. The statistics show that less people are using public transport than before.

In 2000-01 there were 436 million passenger journeys on local bus services, 25% less than ten years previously. In 2000-01 there were 65.3 million rail passenger journeys originating in Scotland, 2.4 million less than the previous year. This trend has been accompanied by an increase in the use of cars, signifying that people in Scotland feel they have to use their own method of transport rather than public transport. The numbers of people using buses and trains in this country is on the decline and given the state of public transport it is easy to see why.

A strategic overview of all forms of transport to develop a National Transport Plan is required to determine short, medium and long term priorities to ensure that investment in our transport network will both meet Scotland's social and economic needs and respect our environment. The privatisation of much of Scotland's public transport infrastructure, in particular the railways, is one of failure to match the needs of the Scottish people. It has resulted in too many people being left reliant on their own motor vehicle and as a consequence the environment has suffered. There have been various debates in the Scottish Parliament on transport problems in certain areas (one on Southern Edinburgh on the 1st October and another on the Elgin bypass on 17th September) but now is the time to have a serious considered debate on Scotland's transport problems across the country. We must get Scotland's transport system back on track.

NICHOLSON REPORT

Alex welcomes the recent publication of the Nicholson Report on licensing law (which was discussed in the Scottish Parliament on the 17th September) and is calling for its swift implementation by the Scottish Executive. Existing law on alcohol does not reflect contemporary attitudes to it. Mature and responsible consumption of alcohol has to be encouraged and the introduction of accredited and certified training within the licensed trade to encourage the absolute highest standards of professionalism within it should be a priority. Such training should be a prerequisite before an individual can apply for, or renew a license.

The reports recommendations that a clear set of licensing principles should be introduced to aide this process are particularly welcome. Specifically these are the prevention of crime and disorder, the promotion of public safety, the prevention of public nuisance, the promotion of health and the protection of children from harm. Also, the report recommends that 'irresponsible promotional activities' that encourage binge drinking should be ended. Furthermore the report visualises a system of officers charged with the responsibility for ensuring that the requirements of the report are met by licensed premises.

There is currently a massive drinking culture within Scotland, unfortunately particularly prevalent amongst the young, and the aim of the Nicholson Report is to encourage more responsible attitudes to the way in which alcohol is sold and consumed. It is this aspect that Alex Neil particularly welcomes as he believes the time to change attitudes to alcohol is now to reduce incidences of alcohol related violence and to improve people's health. The task now is to see that the Nicholson Report is implemented.

SCOTLAND'S POOR HEALTH RECORD MUST BE IMPROVED UPON

The Scottish Parliament debated the vital issue of improving Scotland's health record on 18th September. Urgent action to improve Scotland's poor health record must become a priority. Scotland currently has one of the worst health rates in the whole of Europe. Some of the statistics involved make for startling reading.

For example, Scotland has the second worst male life expectancy in the European Union (only Portugal is worse), with a life expectancy of 72.9 years (as opposed to the UK overall which is 75.4 years). Cancer is also a huge problem in Scotland, and one that is growing. Over the course of the 1990s the number of cancer cases diagnosed increased by 5% for men and 6% for women.

It is also estimated that 500,000 people in Scotland suffer from Coronary Heart Disease (CDH), and in 2001 almost 12,000 died of CDH. Also, in the year ending March 2002 there were almost 24,000 individuals discharged from NHS hospitals with a diagnosis of stroke.

Future generations of Scots will have to be far healthier, and that will take a huge shift in attitude towards personal health. In 1998, 34% of Scottish men and 32% of Scottish women smoked. This compared with 28% of men and 26% of women in England and Wales. There are alarming figures in relation to alcohol consumption too. In a survey conducted in 2000, 21% of those 12-15 year olds who were questioned had drunk alcohol in the week prior to being questioned. There is also a huge problem with obesity in Scotland. 40% of men and 30% of women in Scotland are overweight, and 16% of men and 17% of women are clinically obese.

These figures show that Scotland's ill health is directly related to poor lifestyle choices and this is an area that demands immediate attention to change things in the future. Scotland is one of the sickest nations in Europe. The facts plainly speak for themselves, and our poor life expectancy rate and incidences of cancer, strokes and heart disease show this up to be true. However, it is possible to change things for the better. Finland in the past had a very poor health record and they acted to turn this around. Scotland must learn from this positive example.

Action must be taken today to improve the health of Scotland tomorrow. Far too many of our ills are caused by poor lifestyle choices and we must try and change this. If we can get people eating healthier and drinking in a more responsible way, and improving the amount of exercise undertaken then we can improve our country's health.

MSPs SURGERIES:

Alex Neil MSP holds regular surgeries to which all constituents from across Central Scotland are welcome to attend. They are held in the Bellshill Cultural Centre, John Street, Bellshill from 6pm to 7pm on the following days:

1st December 2003; 5th January 2004; 2nd February 2004; and 1st March 2004

If you are unable to attend any of Alex's surgeries his office are able to take enquiries at other times. Telephone them at the Scottish Parliament on **0131-348-5702/5703** or in his Motherwell Constituency Office on **01698-249000**.

IN BRIEF

GAELIC BILL

The first thing that Alex did on his return to the Scottish Parliament in May after the elections was lodge his proposal for a Bill to establish a basis of equality between the Gaelic and English languages in Scotland. According to the last census the percentage of those able to understand, speak, read or write Gaelic is now 1.89% of the population, roughly speaking only around 95,000 people.

Alex lodged his proposal as he feels urgent action is necessary to remedy the stark decline in the use of the Gaelic language before it dies out completely.

CARE HOMES

Did you know that there are less care homes in Scotland today than there has been in the past? In 1998 there were 681 homes across the country, but by 2002 there were only 605, a decline in 76. This decline in the number of care homes has been particularly stark amongst those provided by Local Authorities, which has fallen from 246 in 1997, to just 198 in 2002.

Alex is concerned by the decreasing availability of beds in care homes for older people and recognises that it is they who suffer as a consequence. It is clear that more beds are needed, particularly in the long term as Scotland's population is ageing. There should be a National Beds Review to determine how many beds are needed in Scotland.

WATER INDUSTRY

Alex believes that there should be an immediate inquiry into the water industry. He is calling for this in light of the high cost of water services in Scotland, and argues for an end to the back door privatisation of the Scottish water industry. There should also be a clear commitment to keep Scotland's water under democratic control and public ownership, and no use of PFI for investment in the water industry. There is also much wrong with the industry's infrastructure. Reports have indicated that as much as one billion litres of purified drinking water are lost every day owing to the poor state of Scotland's pipeline network. This shows that investment is desperately needed, and Alex is determined that it is the right kind of investment that is sought.

CHUNGHWA UPDATE

Alex has been involved in working closely with the workers at the Chungghwa Factory in Mossend, Lanarkshire since the company announced they were closing their operation there. Alex has recently called for any profits made by the company from the sale of their site to be ploughed back into the local community. Alex has previously called for the return of public monies given by the government to the company for setting up in the area. Chungghwa were forced to return £8million of the £15million given to them from the public purse, meaning they have been allowed to retain £7million. Alex is now determined that they should not profit further for their failure to live up to their earlier promises to provide permanent employment in Lanarkshire.

Chungghwa promised big things for the people of Lanarkshire when they arrived in 1996, leading the people who worked with them to believe that they were in a job for life. This provided much of the rationale for giving them so much public money in the way of grants to encourage them here. However with the plant closing it is clear that this early promise has not been lived up to and we must now look for solutions.

Alex calls upon Chungghwa to do the decent thing and return any monies they make through the sale of the site to the people of Lanarkshire so that we can encourage other businesses to flourish in the area and provide long-term employment for the people here.

DRUGS DEATHS

There are alarming figures that show a dramatic rise in the number of drug related deaths in Ayrshire and Lanarkshire. In the year 2002 there were 33 deaths through drugs in the Ayrshire and Arran NHS Board area, compared to 3 in 1996, and in 2002 there were 37 deaths through drugs in the Lanarkshire NHS Board area, compared to 11 in 1996. This trend is replicated across Scotland as a whole. In 2002 there were 382 drugs related deaths across the country compared to 244 in 1996.

This massive increase in drugs related deaths clearly illustrates that immediate action is needed to try and halt this dangerous and worrying trend.

It is clear that we have a growing drugs problem and that is an issue deserving of immediate attention. Drugs pushers should be cracked down on much harder to try and stem the tide of drugs onto the streets. We should not tolerate to any degree the presence of drugs in our communities and only by stopping its supply at source can we begin to see that happening.

There should also be a more holistic approach to the issue of drug abuse. Scotland's drugs problem is a manifestation of our country's high rate of poverty. It is clear that the drugs problem is at its worst and most severe in the nation's poorest housing schemes. If we wish to see massive reductions in drug abuse and hence drugs related deaths then we need to see massive reductions in the rate of poverty in Scotland too.

Contacting *The Standard*:

If you would like to get in touch with us to tell us of an issue you believe is of importance, or for any reason at all then please fill in this section and send it to one of the contact addresses on the first page.

Name
Address.....
.....Postcode.....

I have an issue that I would like to bring to Alex Neil MSP's attention:
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