

Sturgeon must come clean on second CAP crisis

22 Jun 2017



Nicola Sturgeon has been urged to “come clean” on whether or not the Scottish Government will need to ask for an extension in delivering vital farming payments.

The deadline for processing Common Agricultural Policy cash is next Friday and, if that is missed, the European Commission could slap ministers with a fine of up to £60 million.

As of last week, nearly 6000 farmers were still waiting for 2016 CAP payments, and the Scottish Government is signing off significantly fewer than 1000 a week.

That means the deadline will almost certainly be missed, with the prospect of a huge penalty for the taxpayer and more hardship for farmers.

At First Minister’s Questions today, Scottish Conservative Ruth Davidson demanded answers on what contact the SNP has had with the EC over an extension.

However, Ms Sturgeon wouldn’t say if a derogation had been sought – despite being asked specifically three times – instead saying she would “endeavour to make payments on time”.

Last year, the Scottish Government’s failed IT system starved rural Scotland of hundreds of millions of pounds.

And just last week, Audit Scotland warned the problems would only be fixed in 2018 “at the earliest” and that serious issues remained in processing the crucial subsidies.

Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson said:

“The deadline for processing these payments is a week away and, if the Scottish Government does not meet that deadline, it could be fined tens of millions of pounds.

“That’s why rural Scotland and taxpayers need to know if the SNP has approached the European Commission for an extension.

“Instead, Nicola Sturgeon did what her rural affairs secretary did earlier this week and dodged the question.

“It’s a disgrace that so many farmers are still waiting for payments, and it

looks like – for the second year running – the SNP is going to have to go cap-in-hand to Europe and ask for special treatment.

“This all has a massive knock-on impact for the wider rural economy.

“It’s no wonder rural communities have completely lost trust in the SNP.”

As of June 15, 5861 payments were still to be processed before next Friday’s deadline.

On average, the Scottish Government’s IT system is processing 895 payments a week, meaning the deadline will almost certainly be missed.

To see the full statistics, visit the below link and click “cap payment updates”:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/cap-payments-update/>

In a damning report last week, Audit Scotland said – should that deadline be missed – the Scottish Government could be fined up to £60 million:

<http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/report/common-agricultural-policy-futures-programme-further-update>

Earlier this year, Nicola Sturgeon offered assurances to farmers that she’d sort out the CAP crisis:

“Last year’s problems with farm payments were unacceptable. Many of you, rightly, made that very clear to us. So did your union.

“In fact farm payments has been a good example of the role NFUS can play. It has been clear in its criticism, while also being very constructive in working with us to mitigate the impact on farmers.

“I want to assure all of you today that lessons have been learned. The Scottish Government has already accepted every recommendation made by Audit Scotland in relation to future payments, as part of our work to improve the system. We have also made £270 million of loans available for farmers who needed to receive their 2016 payments in January or earlier. And we expect all 2016 payments to be made by the end of June.

“We understand the difficulties that late payments caused to you last year. We apologise for those difficulties. We are determined not to repeat them.”

(*Scottish Government*, 7 February 2017, [link](#)).

And rural affairs secretary Fergus Ewing made similar remarks:

“However, we must be realistic. I am determined that, for the 2016 payments, we make clear to Parliament and to the farming industry what the likely timescales really look like. The farming industry needs to have confidence in the payment timetable and that we will do what we say. There must be no repeat of the problems that were faced in 2015-16.

“From day 1 in the job and for the foreseeable future, the resolution of the CAP payment issues is my top priority as [cabinet](#) secretary. I assure members and all those who are listening in Scotland’s rural communities that I will devote all necessary time and attention to that task. It is my number 1

priority. I give the chamber the categorical assurance that I am determined to oversee and drive forward the work that is necessary to bring the payment regime back on to an even keel.

“I am determined that the Government will learn the lessons from the futures programme not just for the remainder of that programme but for our wider portfolio of [IT](#) programmes. However, I do not wish to distract from the clear and present task of getting the last of the payments out to farmers and crofters. Now is the time to focus on that, and on meeting the payment deadline successfully, but I can say to members that there will be a process to learn lessons from the experience.

“On behalf of the Scottish Government, I address three simple words to all farmers and crofters who have suffered as a result: we are sorry. Let me follow that up with four further words: we are fixing it.”

(*Official Report*, 31 May 2016, [link](#)).

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21 Jun 2017



Scottish Government ministers have admitted their performance on complying with Freedom of Information laws “isn’t good enough”.

In a Holyrood debate sparked by the Scottish Conservatives today, the SNP’s record on replying to FoI requests was heavily criticised by opposition parties.

It follows an open letter from journalists complaining about transparency sent earlier this month, as well as statistics showing the Scottish Government is worse than other public sector bodies at responding in full and on time.

And today, the Scottish Government’s business manager Joe Fitzpatrick told MSPs that “recent performance has not been good enough” and those submitting FoI requests “have had reasons to be unhappy”.

However, he also hinted that – 12 years on from FoI laws being passed – people were more familiar with the legislation, and therefore more likely to submit detailed requests which, he said, now take an average of seven hours

to resolve.

The Scottish Government also accepted the debate motion, which “condemns” the SNP’s performance and calls for an independent inquiry into the issue.

Yesterday, the Scottish Conservatives revealed that barely a third of FoIs to the Scottish Government result in a “full disclosure”, compared to 57 per cent across other public bodies.

Scottish Conservative MSP Edward Mountain said:

“There are serious concerns about the way in which the Scottish Government is interpreting and implementing FoI legislation.

“There have been widespread complaints about delays beyond the 20 working-day deadline, emails requesting updates being routinely ignored and ministers taking control of requests without the consent of the applicant.

“Delays and withholding information are not acceptable.

“But it’s not just Freedom of Information – there are also examples of Scottish Government meetings held with no agendas or minutes, or ministers hiding behind a thin veil of commercial confidentiality.

“It all points to an SNP code of secrecy.

“Thankfully, by its own admission, the SNP agrees we need an independent inquiry into this.

“That proves the Scottish Government has been disingenuous in dealing with FoIs, it knows it has and it can’t hide it, and that ministers must be more honest, transparent and accountable in future.”

The text of today’s Scottish Conservative motion, which the SNP added to but did not amend, reads: *“That parliament condemns the Scottish Government’s poor performance in responding to Freedom of Information requests and calls for an independent inquiry into the way the Scottish Government deals with them. Furthermore, parliament agrees to undertake post-legislative scrutiny of the Act.”*

Yesterday, the Scottish Conservatives revealed SNP failures on FoI:
<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/2017/06/scottish-governments-foi-failure-exposed/>

Scottish Government's FoI failure exposed

21 Jun 2017



The Scottish Government's response rate for Freedom of Information requests is well below the national average, it has been revealed.

Research by the Scottish Conservatives has found that, of all FoI requests dealt with by ministers in the last year, barely a third resulted in a "full disclosure".

That's considerably lower than the overall rate for all Scottish public sector bodies, which stands at 57 per cent.

The figures come amid growing pressure on the Scottish Government over its record of transparency. Earlier this month journalists wrote an open letter raising fears about the FoI performance of the Scottish Government.

And tomorrow, the Scottish Conservatives will raise the issue as part of their party business at Holyrood.

They will cite figures exposing ministers' worsening performance on responding to FoI submissions.

Between 2016 and 2017, the Scottish Government received 2310 requests, but only responded in full to 879 of them – 38 per cent.

In contrast, all public bodies – including councils and health boards – received 81,641 requests, issuing full responses for 46,486, a total of 56.9 per cent.

Response times at the Scottish Government were also worse than average, with 21.6 per cent coming late, compared to 9.6 per cent nationally.

Scottish Conservative MSP Jamie Greene said:

"These figures prove that the SNP government is paying lip service to the idea of transparency.

"In its place, we see a culture of secrecy where the first instinct is to sweep legitimate requests for information under the carpet.

"These figures will add to the growing question marks over the politicisation of the Scottish Government under the SNP.

"The fact is that Nicola Sturgeon's control freak government has lost the trust of many Scots.

“We need ministers to show some humility for once, accept there needs to be a root and branch change in their working practices, and deliver the kind of open government that people want and deserve.”

For the full tables of statistics, visit:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/Scotland-FOI-2016-17.xlsx>

Earlier this month, journalists expressed their FoI concerns in an open letter:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-40120002>

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20 Jun 2017



The number of school leavers ending up in “positive destinations” has fallen for the first time in five years.

Figures released today show 8.6 per cent of young people are deemed to have become unemployed on leaving school, instead of going on to work, training or further education.

That compares to eight per cent last year, and is the first decline of that trend since 2011.

The Scottish Government report also showed little change in the closing of the attainment gap when it comes to positive destinations, with the gap actually widening slightly from last year.

While 96.2 per cent of those from the least deprived backgrounds ended up in positive destinations in 2015/16, just 85 per cent of those from the poorest did – a gap of 11.2 percentage points.

The gap in 2014/15 was 10 points, although was as high as 13.4 in 2011/12.

Scottish Conservative shadow education secretary Liz Smith said:

“This is another indicator on education which has gone down on Nicola Sturgeon’s watch.

“The number of young people going on to positive destinations is one of the First Minister’s go-to statistics when she is under pressure.

“Now she can’t even say that is increasing.

“What’s more, the likelihood of a school-leaver ending up at university, college, training or work is still far too dependent on their background.

“No real improvement has been made on that front either, and the SNP is running out of excuses about why that is.”

To see the full report, visit:

<http://www.gov.scot/Publications/2017/06/9699>

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20 Jun 2017



The Scottish Government has announced a major u-turn in relation to its controversial named person policy following a Supreme Court ruling.

Today, education secretary John Swinney revealed public bodies operating the scheme will be forced to think twice before sharing information about a young person or their family.

That means parents who do not accept the advice of named persons will not be subsequently viewed with suspicion by authorities, the Scottish Conservatives said.

The change follows a ruling last year by the UK Supreme Court which found aspects of the SNP’s state guardian legislation unlawful.

Mr Swinney set out the changes as part of the Children and Young People (Information Sharing) (Scotland) bill.

The Scottish Conservatives said while the clarification on data sharing was welcome, serious concerns about the legislation remain.

Scottish Conservative shadow education secretary Liz Smith said:

“The named person policy was a huge mistake from beginning to end which is why the Scottish Government has been forced into a major u-turn.

“The announcement today effectively means that no parent will now be forced to accept the advice from his or her child’s named person and that refusal to accept advice will no longer be treated with suspicion by the authorities.

“The Supreme Court ruling made clear that the data-sharing aspects of the Act were unlawful on account of the fact that they had the potential to contravene other legislation and to allow state intrusion into family life.

“Quite rightly, the vast majority of parents found that unacceptable.

“The Scottish Conservatives believe that the revised bill still raises many questions and it also lays bare the extent of the expense to the taxpayer of this ill-conceived policy.”

More information on the bill is here:

<https://news.gov.scot/news/supporting-children-and-families-1>

The Scottish Conservatives have opposed the named person scheme from the outset:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/named-person/>