

Nicola Sturgeon to give free childcare to under-fives by 2020 ^[1]

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Nicola Sturgeon will today unveil plans to spend £840 million a year on "transformational" plans to introduce a system of full-time state childcare as she set her sights on another decade in power.

The First Minister will also re-affirm her commitment to a second independence referendum after Brexit when she tells SNP delegates at the party's conference in Glasgow that it is time to "put Scotland in the driving seat".

The Scottish Government has been carrying out "detailed work" in recent weeks to assess the costs of the flagship early years education policy after it announced the intention to implement it through an individual credit account-style system to ensure flexibility.

Confirmation of the plans comes after finance secretary Derek Mackay issued a call for full control over income tax to be handed to the Scottish Parliament. It has also been reported that he is considering an overhaul of the tax band system to raise extra revenues for public services.

Under the new childcare plan, parents will be entitled to 1,140 hours a year - about 30 hours a week - which effectively mirrors the primary school week.

It will mean a rise in costs from the current £420m a year to about £840m and the First Minister will today pledge to meet this as part of a drive to make Scotland the "best place to grow up in the world".

All three- and four-year-olds and vulnerable two-year-olds will be eligible by 2020.

"It will give children the best start in life," Ms Sturgeon will say today.

"And working parents will save around £350 a month on the costs of childcare.

"Often when I have talked about this policy, I've been asked - sometimes sceptically - if we will really be able to fund it properly. Well, today, we put our money where our mouth is. Over the past few months, we have undertaken detailed work to assess the investment needed.

"Right now, we invest around £420m a year in early years education and childcare. I can announce today that by the end of this parliament, that will rise to £840m a year.

"This is a commitment unmatched anywhere else in the UK and it's the best investment we can make in Scotland's future."

The childcare issue has been problematic for the Scottish Government as many families say they currently miss out on the 16 hours free entitlement as it is generally either a morning or an afternoon session each day. Many nurseries will not allow them to "top up" and pay for the additional half day, meaning they turn to private nurseries, funding the full day.

Ms Sturgeon's speech comes after she unveiled a radical Programme for Government last month, which included the prospect of tax hikes, a ban on certain vehicles from city centres and a shift towards electric cars.

"Over the past ten years, we have led the way," Ms Sturgeon will say.

"Our focus now is on the next ten years and beyond."

Ms Sturgeon yesterday insisted she has a mandate for a second independence referendum by the end of this parliament. She will warn today that the changing world, including Brexit, escalates the need for a repeat of the 2014 vote in Scotland.

The SNP leader will warn that the world now is "being shaped by events that no country on its own can hope to completely control".

"But we face the added uncertainty of a UK now being driven down the most uncertain path in modern times. We know that Scotland does better when decisions are taken here in Scotland.

"So as we look ahead we face a choice: We can trail in the wake of the change that is coming - or we can choose to shape our own future.

"Let's resolve this today. Let's not wait for others to decide for us. Let's put Scotland in the driving seat."

Ms Sturgeon had initially called for a vote to be held in the autumn of next year or the spring of 2019, but, following the loss of 21 seats in June's general election, she put the timing on hold until the terms of Brexit become clearer.

The SNP's calls for a second referendum have also been rejected by the UK government. Prime Minister Theresa May has insisted: "Now is not the time."

But Ms Sturgeon told STV News yesterday: "We have a mandate for this parliament. We won that mandate last year but after the general election I heard clearly people saying with the uncertainty of Brexit it was premature to be definitive about a timescale now."

She added: "So I have said I will not consider the timescale until there is a greater clarity about the Brexit talks."

Scottish Conservative deputy leader Jackson Carlaw said: "What Nicola Sturgeon seems to forget is she's already had more than ten years in power to do all the things she speaks of here.

"Perhaps if she'd spent more time on the day job, and less time trying to break up Britain, some of this so-called vision would already have been achieved."

Political opponents have urged her to ditch another vote entirely, while some figures within the SNP have called for it to be delayed until after the 2021 election.

Plans for another referendum have not been debated on the conference floor, but senior ministers such as finance secretary Derek Mackay and Deputy First Minister John Swinney have issued rallying calls for independence in their speeches.

The SNP leader is also expected to focus heavily on Brexit, with Scottish ministers highly critical of the UK government's approach to negotiations with the European Union.

Scottish Labour MSP James Kelly said: "The voters sent Nicola Sturgeon a message loud and clear in the general election - when the SNP lost almost half its MPs - that they do not want another divisive independence referendum. It is time the First Minister listened to that message and ruled out another divisive referendum."

-reprinted from The Scotsman

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