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Bruce Crawford MSP  
Convener  
Finance and Constitution Committee  
Scottish Parliament  
Edinburgh  
EH99 1SP

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Dear Bruce,

### Timing of Scottish Budget 2020-21

I am writing to propose that the Scottish Budget should be published on 6 February 2020.

You will recall that we earlier agreed to publish the Scottish Budget on 12 December, but that the calling of a UK General Election for that day required us to cancel those plans.

The UK Government announced on 7 January that the UK Budget is to be published on 11 March, only three weeks before the start of the new financial year. In November, I agreed with the Committee that the 2020-21 Scottish Budget should ideally not be published before a UK Budget. However, the severely delayed timing of the UK Budget makes it impossible to publish the Scottish Budget after the UK Budget without restricting the time available to Parliament to consider the Scottish Budget to an extent that I feel is unacceptable.


Regarding the timing of the Budget Bill, I propose to introduce the Bill in Parliament on the same day that I publish the Scottish Budget. I envisage that the remaining Stages of the Bill will take place to a compressed timescale, and my initial proposal is for Stage 1 in the week beginning 24 February, and Stages 2 and 3 both in the week beginning 2 March. I appreciate that it is for Parliament to determine the timing of consideration of the Bill, and that it is possible these timings may need to change – and accordingly this timetable is subject to consultation with the Committee.

I have given particular consideration on whether to conclude Stage 3 before 11 March, noting that we do not yet know whether or how the UK Budget will change our budget position. My view is that it is of the utmost importance to have a new Budget Act in place by 1 April, to avoid any risk under the statutory 'emergency arrangements' around our ability to fund the newly devolved social security benefits. I feel leaving Stage 3 until after 11 March would unduly heighten the risk of not securing Royal Assent for the Bill in time for 1 April, a risk that could be further exacerbated by the Scottish Fiscal Commission needing further time to revise its forecasts in response to the UK Budget. I remain mindful of the need for an orderly plan and process with due time for Parliament to scrutinise and for the Government to be able to negotiate support, and accordingly I would suggest that seeking to push the Bill process into mid or late March would not be reasonable from the Government's, the Parliament's or local government's perspective. Any improvements to our budget position from the UK Budget could instead be applied through an in-year revision.

My proposed timescale can only be achieved with flexibility on the part of the Parliament regarding Bill procedures and Standing Orders, and my officials will continue to work with the Parliament's officials to discuss any necessary details. My officials will also continue to liaise with Committee clerks and parliamentary officials regarding steps to complete the process for the Bill to receive Royal Assent after completing its parliamentary stages before the start of the financial year, so that we ensure that the Scottish Government's authority to fund public services in Scotland is not interrupted.

In the exceptional circumstances created by the delay to the UK Budget, I hope you will agree that it is unavoidable to deviate from the normal provisions in the Written Agreement between the Scottish Government and the Committee. Please be assured that the Scottish Government remains fully committed to the Budget process set out in the Written Agreement, which reflects the proper role of the Parliament in the Budget process.

I am also writing today to Dame Susan Rice at the Scottish Fiscal Commission regarding the timing of the Scottish Budget, and copying this letter to her.



**DEREK MACKAY**