

**Levack at Large**  
**Project Scotland – September 2011**

Back to school for MSPs this month. At the time of writing, we are about to hear what the Scottish Government's legislative programme for the next Parliamentary year has in store for us.

Meanwhile, the Parliament's recently re-constituted Scotland Bill committee is gathering evidence in support of an ongoing campaign by MSPs to secure additional powers north of the border through their scrutiny of the Scotland Bill at Westminster.

This autumn, we can also expect John Swinney to present a Scottish spending review setting out the Scottish Government's spending plans over the next three years.

So a busy few months in prospect and a range of potential campaigns for the Scottish Building Federation to sink its teeth into. In terms of the Scottish Government's legislative programme, the main highlight from a construction industry perspective is likely to be a Sustainable Procurement Bill, partly intended to introduce community benefit clauses into public sector tendering for construction projects.

In practical terms, this means greater preference in the award of public contracts being given to contractors that provide local employment and apprenticeship opportunities. If properly constructed, the Bill should, in particular, give smaller building firms better access to the public procurement market, which is to be strongly welcomed.

SBF has just submitted evidence to the Scotland Bill committee, strongly supporting the case the committee is making for immediate access to reinforced borrowing powers for the Scottish Government. SBF would like to see these powers brought into force as soon as possible to help ease the significant pressure currently being placed on capital budgets for affordable housing and school building. We have continued to highlight the additional pressure on these budgets arising from a commitment to deliver the new Forth Crossing, entirely funded through the capital budget, by 2016.

Which brings us to the spending review. SBF's recent campaigning has also highlighted industry concerns about the substantial cuts being inflicted on the public housing budget. Public investment in affordable housing has undoubtedly helped to sustain many building firms during the economic downturn as private sector housebuilding and commercial construction have remained in the doldrums.

The campaign to prioritise greater funding for affordable housing has been lent further weight by a recent public opinion poll commissioned jointly by SBF and the Chartered Institute of Building Scotland which found affordable housing to be the Scottish public's number one priority for public capital investment. Meanwhile, the poll found the new Forth Crossing languishing at the bottom of the public priority list.

Many of our members remain sceptical of the merits of the Scottish Government's National Housing Trust initiative, which Ministers continue to trumpet as a magical vehicle for delivering many more units of affordable housing for much less public investment. Whilst I accept there is always scope to become more efficient and to cut unnecessary costs, there is a real risk that the quality of new build homes and schools will suffer in the drive to reduce unit costs and justify the budget cuts.

A busy autumn in prospect, then. By improving public procurement, by securing borrowing powers for capital investment, by delivering greater investment in affordable housing, SBF will be lobbying MSPs hard over the coming weeks and months to deliver a better deal for the Scottish construction industry.