



Assembly Update: November 2015

Prepared by Ellen Finlay, WRDA Women's Sector Lobbyist

Oral Questions

| Issues | Question | Answer |
|--------------------------------|---|--|
| <p>New minimum wage</p> | <p>Rosaleen McCorley (SF) asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to detail the implications of the new minimum wages for departmental budgets.</p> | <p><u>Mrs Foster:</u> I am not sure that the new minimum wage will have a big impact on departmental budgets. When it comes in, the living wage will have an impact, particularly on the Department of Health and Social Services, because many of our care workers, for example, are paid in and around the minimum wage. When they move on to the living wage, that will obviously be more expensive for the Department, and that will have to be taken into account when we set its budget.</p> <p><u>Ms McCorley:</u> Go raibh maith agat. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagra. I thank the Minister for her answer. What challenges will that pose for arm's-length bodies and community organisations? What can government do to support those groups?</p> <p><u>Mrs Foster:</u> We must be aware of the scale of the issue. I was recently contacted by some of the groups involved in the social care sector to say that it will have a big impact on them. I know from the tourism and hospitality sector that it will be a big challenge there as well. While we all welcome the fact that we are moving towards having a living-wage economy, we should be aware that there are challenges associated with it, particularly for the lower-paid sectors. Whilst bigger employers in the private sector will be able to absorb those costs, it will be a challenge for us in the public sector.</p> |
| <p>Poverty</p> | <p>Chris Hazzard (SF) asked when OFMDFM will be producing an anti-poverty strategy.</p> | <p>Junior Minister Pengelly: We have accepted the court's judgement on our statutory obligations to provide an anti-poverty strategy, although I was disappointed that the court did not give more weight to the significant range of actions that we have been taking to address poverty, social exclusion and deprivation, particularly the innovative and exciting work on our Delivery Social Change framework and on developing an outcomes focus on addressing poverty and the consequences of poverty. Through the Executive's Delivering Social Change programme, we have committed over £100 million to reducing poverty and the consequences of living in areas of deprivation. We have spent over £27 million on our Delivering Social Change signature projects, including significant contributions to the projects jointly funded with Atlantic Philanthropies, which in total are worth almost £60 million over this year and the next three years. In all that work, we have focused strategically on improving outcomes across a range of poverty and deprivation measures, including health, education and developing the economy to improve the lives of those in poverty. I am disappointed that the court took a very narrow view on the definition of what constitutes a strategy, but we are working to address the concerns of the court, and we will bring forward proposals in the coming months, following appropriate consultation and deliberation.</p> |

Written Assembly Questions

| Issues | Question | Answer |
|-------------------|--|---|
| Bus Passes | David McIlveen (DUP) asked the Minister of Education to outline the process and criteria for applying for a bus pass. | I should begin by clarifying that pupils apply for transport assistance and not specifically a bus pass. Should a pupil be eligible for transport assistance the Education Authority will determine what type of assistance is most appropriate. This may take the form of a bus pass, a seat on an Education Authority vehicle, or a monetary allowance. Parents may apply to their Education Authority Region for consideration. Eligibility for assistance is determined by application of the school transport policy's criteria which are: distance, and suitable school. The distances used are two miles for Primary pupils and three miles for Post-Primary pupils measured by the shortest route capable of being walked between home and school. A suitable school is one in the recognised categories of grant-aided school. Namely: Catholic Maintained, Controlled and Other Voluntary, Integrated, Irish Medium, Denominational and Non-Denominational grammar. No other definition of 'suitable school' is used. |
| Housing | Oliver Mullen (SF) asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of whether the provision of social housing in rural areas matches that in urban areas. | I am committed to increasing the number of social homes throughout Northern Ireland whether it is in an urban or rural area. Housing activity in rural areas, which is classed as a settlement with a population of up to 5,000 is identified by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive through their Rural Action Plan, and then delivered through the Social Housing Development Programme. During the last financial year 2,013 new social homes were started in Northern Ireland of which 119 were in rural areas. In monetary terms, this equates to some £6.5 million of Housing Association Grant invested in new social housing schemes in the rural parts of Northern Ireland to help address need and sustain local communities. I continue to support the Northern Ireland Housing Executive's commitment to deliver social housing in rural communities. |
| Poverty | Megan Fearon (SF) asked the Minister for Social Development for his assessment of the findings of the Poverty Bulletin 2013/14. | The Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister currently has lead responsibility within the Executive for tackling poverty. However, my Department holds many of the policy and operational levers to address poverty and disadvantage on the ground and has and will continue to play a major role in progressing the Executive's Delivering Social Change Agenda, the aim of which is to break the cycle of poverty and disadvantage that characterises our most deprived individuals, families and communities. My Department is responsible for measuring poverty in Northern Ireland and the results of the 2013-14 Poverty Bulletin would indicate that the overall long-term trend of poverty in Northern Ireland has remained fairly stable since 2002/2003, with approximately one fifth of the population living in poverty. Northern Ireland has experienced a slight increase in |

Fuel Poverty

Claire Sugden (Ind) asked the Minister for Social Development what support is available to families that are at risk of fuel poverty, but are not eligible for the Affordable Warmth Scheme?

relative poverty from 19% in 2012-13 to 21% both before and after Housing Costs. Clearly, there is much work still to be done by this Executive in relation to reducing poverty in Northern Ireland. I would reiterate the full commitment of myself and my Department to continuing to work to support the Executive in its efforts to tackle poverty and social exclusion.

The Affordable Warmth Scheme is delivered in partnership between my Department, the Northern Ireland Housing Executive and local councils. Local council staff make the initial contact with householders considered to be most at risk of fuel poverty to assess eligibility for the Affordable Warmth Scheme. Where the household is not eligible for assistance under the Affordable Warmth Scheme, council staff can refer them on to the Northern Ireland Sustainable Energy Programme which provides a range of schemes to assist low income households improve their energy efficiency. My Department's Boiler Replacement Scheme also provides a grant of up to £1,000 to replace old inefficient boilers. Council staff may also direct householders to the Bryson Energy Freephone advice line to obtain independent and impartial advice for domestic householders in Northern Ireland. This advice line is funded by my Department through the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Advice and guidance is available on NI Direct for people who want to improve the energy efficiency of their homes. Council staff also advise householders of the Social Security Agency's 'Make the Call' campaign and if the householder agrees they will send their details to the Make the Call team to undertake a Benefit Entitlement Check. In addition my Department will issue the annual Winter Fuel Payment (£100 - £300) to qualifying households again this year. My Department also operates the Cold Weather Payment, which is issued to qualifying households when the temperature is or is forecast to be zero or below for 7 consecutive days between 1 November and 31 March. This payment could be made several times during the qualifying period, depending on the temperature.

Health/Suicide Issues

Ross Hussey (UUP) to ask the Minister of Health, Social Services & Public Safety to detail his Department's suicide prevention strategy for the next five years that specifically deals with young people, the LGB&T community and people with mental health issues.

A new draft strategy will be issued for consultation in early 2016. It will be in two parts: the first covering frontline intervention and postvention, and the second covering early intervention to promote emotional resilience and positive mental health as protective factors to reduce suicide risk. The early intervention section will include tailored support for young people, those with mental health issues and raised risk groups. The frontline intervention section will include specific actions to reduce the incidence of suicide amongst those in the care of mental health services.

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| <p>Broadband in Rural areas</p> | <p>Kieran McCarthy (Alliance) asked the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment for an update on the rollout of broadband to rural areas.</p> | <p>In February 2014, my Department contracted BT to deliver the Northern Ireland Broadband Improvement Project (NIBIP). This is primarily aimed at rural areas and seeks to extend the availability of basic and superfast broadband to those who have limited choice, across Northern Ireland with a target of 45,000 premises by 31 December 2015. Improvements have already been carried out for over 32,000 premises across Northern Ireland, including more than 1,600 in the Strangford constituency. Further details on the project can be found on the DETI website and the NI Direct platform at: http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/index/information-and-services/leisure-home-and-community/technology-and-online-services/broadband-improvement-project.htm.</p> <p>Recognising that NIBIP will not deliver superfast broadband to all premises, my Department in February 2015, awarded a further contract to BT, for the delivery of the Superfast Roll-out Programme (SRP). This project, which again has a primarily rural focus, will provide superfast broadband improvements for almost 39,000 premises across Northern Ireland by December 2017. An extensive survey and design process is underway and will take several months to complete. Further details on roll-out will be published on the NI Direct platform, as it becomes available.</p> |
| <p>School starting age</p> | <p>Claire Sugden (Ind) asked the Minister of Education for his assessment of the issue that not all children are ready to start formal schooling at four years of age.</p> | <p>The foundation stage of the curriculum is specifically designed to provide an age-appropriate education for pupils in Years 1 and 2. The foundation stage provides teachers with flexibility to use their professional judgement and adapt their teaching to best meet the needs of their pupils and to provide for diagnostic assessment, which will provide greater opportunities for teachers to pick up earlier on pupils with particular difficulties. The Education Authority published its “School Starting Age – A Guide for Parents” on 29 October 2015. This guidance covers a range of issues associated with school starting age, including advice for parents who are worried that their child is not ready to start school. I have said before that I am keen to introduce flexibility on school starting age in certain circumstances but this will require a change to primary legislation.</p> |
| <p>Abortion Guidelines</p> | <p>Anna Lo (Alliance) asked the Health Minister when guidelines clarifying the existing law on abortion will be issued.</p> | <p>I hope to bring guidance to the Executive shortly.</p> |

Domestic Violence Strategy

Sandra Overend (UUP) asked the Health minister to outline the reasons for the delay in introducing the Stopping Domestic and Sexual Violence and Abuse Strategy.

Extensive engagement with a diverse range of stakeholders, severe financial pressures and the complex nature of the domestic violence and sexual violence, have been the main contributing factors to the delay. While I am aware that the Department of Justice has a number of issues to resolve with the Justice Committee, the development process is now largely complete and, in partnership with Minister Ford, I am currently giving active consideration to how my Department can deliver against the aims of the proposed Strategy in the exceptionally difficult financial environment in which we are now operating.

Boards

Sean Rodgers (SDLP) asked the Minister of Education for a breakdown of gender balance on each of his Department's publicly appointed boards.

The gender balance for the public appointments made to the Non Departmental Public Bodies sponsored by my Department is as follows:

| | Male | Female |
|---|-------------|---------------|
| Education Authority | 8 | 13 |
| Council for Catholic Maintained Schools | 2 | 2 |
| Diocesan Education Committees of the CCMS | 5 | 2 |
| General Teaching Council | 1 | 2 |
| Middletown Centre for Autism, Armagh - Board of Directors | 1 | 4 |
| Council for the Curriculum Examinations & Assessment | 8 | 6 |
| Youth Council for NI | 3 | 3 |

**Women's Centre
Childcare Fund**

Robin Swann (UUP) asked the Minister of Social Development for his assessment of the work supported by the Women's Centre Childcare Fund and what steps he is taking to extend it beyond March 2016.

The Department recently commissioned an evaluation of the Women's Centre Childcare Fund, which has been an emergency measure since 2008. The evaluation concluded that the programme provided a wide range of positive impacts, both in relation to the development and well-being of children and also in supporting parents to access services and opportunities.

I have indicated that, in the context of the OFMDFM Childcare Strategy, this will be the last year of funding under the Women's Centre Childcare Fund.

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| Exceptional Circumstances Body | 20 | 23 |
| Council for Integrated Education | DE posts are currently vacant | |
| Comhairle ns Gaelscoiliohta | DE posts are currently vacant | |

Motions

| Issue | Motion | |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| European Social Fund | Robin Swann (UUP) Chairperson of DEL Committee brought forward a motion. | <p><i>"That this Assembly acknowledges the important role of the European social fund in delivering essential support and services to the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland; recognises the challenges faced by the community and voluntary sectors in the administration of the current and previous programmes; and calls on the Department for Employment and Learning to learn from its mistakes and to ensure that it works in partnership with the community and voluntary sector to deliver, efficiently and effectively, the European social fund programme."</i></p> <p>The motion passed without a vote being taken.</p> <p>Read the debate in full here.</p> |

| Issue | | |
|-----------------------|--|---|
| Welfare Reform | Full debate on the Legislative Consent Motion: | <p><i>That this Assembly consents to the Northern Ireland (Welfare Reform) Bill 2015 being taken forward by the Westminster Parliament; approves the welfare clauses of the Welfare Reform and Work Bill as initially introduced at Westminster; the draft Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2015; and the Executive's proposals to enhance payments flowing from the agreement announced on 17 November 2015.</i></p> <p>http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2015/11/18&docID=249944</p> |