



Assembly Update: October 2015

Oral Questions

Issues	Question	Answer
Childcare	<p>Sean Rogers (SDLP) asked the First Minister and Deputy First Minister what considerations they have given to implementing 30 hours free weekly childcare for working parents.</p> <p>Barry McElduff (Sinn Fein) asked the First Minister and Deputy First Minister for an update on the implementation, aims and resourcing of the Childcare Strategy.</p>	<p><u>Ms J McCann:</u> With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will answer questions 6 and 10 together.</p> <p>We are aware of the provisions of the Westminster Childcare Bill, which will increase the amount of free preschool childcare available to working parents in England. The Executive have committed to provide a year's funded preschool education to every family that wants it. A full-time preschool place is 22 and a half hours a week, while a part-time place provides 12 and a half hours a week. The primary purpose of the preschool education programme is educational and focused on the development of the child. A positive consequence is that parents can enter the workforce. While, currently, there are no plans to extend the number of hours provided under the preschool education programme, that does not preclude consideration of such provision in the future.</p> <p>In the context of expanding on early care and childhood development initiatives, the Executive's draft childcare strategy is open for public consultation until 13 November. The draft childcare strategy has two high-level aims: to promote child development and to enable parents to join the workforce. Each of those will, in turn, contribute to enhanced levels of economic activity, greater equality and social inclusion and reduced child poverty, thereby delivering social change.</p> <p>The draft strategy proposes 22 separate interventions or actions to give effect to the Executive's vision for childcare. Our proposals will be finalised only on the basis of the feedback that we get from a range of stakeholders, including parents, practitioners and policymakers. Once the strategy is agreed, we will take forward each intervention separately, supported by a detailed business case and implementation plan.</p> <p><u>Mr Rogers:</u> I thank the Minister for her answer. Has OFMDFM had any further discussions on Barnett consequential from the implementation of the 30 hours of free childcare in England?</p> <p><u>Ms J McCann:</u> Officials are looking at the issue of childcare as a whole. I am not sure what you are talking about in relation to the Barnett consequential, and I will come back to you with a definite answer on that. However, our officials are in close contact with officials in the Westminster Government to see how anything that happens there can be developed and brought forward here.</p> <p><u>Mr Agnew:</u> What is being done to ensure that childcare providers are properly trained in the area of special educational needs?</p> <p><u>Ms J McCann:</u> The Member will be aware that, as I have said before during Question Time, the 15 key first sections of the draft childcare strategy were to look especially at training for people who work with children with disabilities. In some of the conversations that I have had when I am out speaking to some of</p>

Joanne Dobson (UUP) asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for his assessment of the idea of grandparental leave for childcare.

the childcare providers, that has been an issue. Therefore, provision is made there for some organisations that deliver that, particularly to children with disabilities, to avail themselves of money to train their staff to an adequate level so that they can work with children with disabilities.

Mr Lyttle: Given that, at times, the monthly cost of childcare for many families is bigger than their monthly mortgage payment, what is the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister doing to promote the existing financial assistance schemes, such as the childcare voucher scheme, to families and employers in Northern Ireland?

Ms J McCann: The Member will be aware that we had long consultations with people on the voucher scheme. We are also looking at the new scheme coming in with that. The childcare voucher scheme will still be available for people who have it at the moment. In terms of the overall childcare strategy, that is exactly what we are trying to do. We are trying to provide childcare in a way that targets the people who most need it. The key issue that will affect families with children is the cuts to tax credits that the Westminster Government are talking about bringing forward. That will impact on over 120,000 families here in the North. On average, each household will lose up to £1,000 a year. That is a big part of the household budget that will be taken away. We are trying to ensure provision for childcare, but there are other issues that will impact on all of that. We will try to do our best, in our childcare strategy, to mitigate the cost as much as possible.

Dr Farry: At this stage, it is very early days, given that it was only announced last week at the Conservative Party conference. In principle, it seems to be a positive idea. As the Member will know, only this year, we introduced shared parental leave. That has been in place since the beginning of April this year. It would take fresh legislation in the Assembly. However, if that is the view of the Member and other parties, I am sure that there would be a strong basis on which we could proceed to introduce legislation along similar lines to legislation that will be introduced for Great Britain.

Mrs Dobson: I am glad that the Minister is aware of the Chancellor's announcement at Westminster. Notwithstanding the need to recognise the primary childcare responsibilities of both fathers and mothers, will the Minister ensure that Northern Ireland keeps pace with the rest of the UK on this policy area?

Dr Farry: Yes, I am very much aware of the importance of ensuring that people in Northern Ireland get full advantage of such provision, and I would join the Member in stressing the importance of remembering that, when we talk about shared parental leave or potential shared grandparental leave, this is all about voluntary participation and enabling people. It is about recognising the different nature of the modern family. We often have two parents who are working or, indeed, single parents, in the case of the grandparent context, who may be working, and there may be a whole host of economic and social reasons why people wish to share the leave available to them in different ways. It is not about forcing people to move away from a more traditional model if that is what particular families prefer, but it is essentially widening choice. This also has

Raymond McCartney (SF) asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the strategy for addressing domestic violence and abuse.

a very strong economic rationale. It is about companies investing in their staff and ensuring that they are treating them with respect, and a productivity gain will come on the back of this to all employers who are required to go along with the new legal framework.

Mr Ford: Significant achievements have been made under the tackling violence at home strategy since it was introduced in 2005. These have included the introduction of multi-agency risk assessment conferencing; a 24-hour domestic-violence Freephone helpline, which expanded last year to include sexual violence; a number of domestic-violence media campaigns; and the introduction of routine enquiry in maternity units to encourage disclosure of domestic violence.

Within my Department, I have increased access to legal aid for victims to apply for non-molestation orders and piloted a new court listing arrangement in Derry, which seeks to improve the victim experience at court. In addition, integrated domestic abuse programmes, which encourage convicted perpetrators of domestic violence to take responsibility for their behaviour, have been developed and delivered. I made provision in the Justice Act 2015 for domestic violence protection notices and orders, which protect victims of domestic violence who may be at risk of immediate harm and danger.

Looking to the future, my Department aims to build on these successes. On 24 September, an official briefed the Committee for Justice on the stopping domestic and sexual violence and abuse strategy. Consideration continues to be given as to how the aims of this strategy may be progressed by my Department and DHSSPS in the current difficult financial environment. The publication of the final strategy will be subject to clearance by the Health Minister and the Executive. In the meantime, I have instructed officials to take forward the implementation of justice priorities within that strategy.

Mr McCartney: Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as an fhreagra sin. I thank the Minister for his answer. I welcome many of the steps which many agencies have taken in relation to domestic violence, and the Minister has outlined a number of them. In the absence of the strategy being rolled out, would the Minister give the House an assurance that it is not a budgetary requirement or deficit that prevents him from rolling out the strategy?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McCartney for his general support of the process as Deputy Chairperson of the Committee. I cannot say whether it is a budgetary issue. The reality is that the budgetary costs to the Department of Justice are, I believe, manageable given the priority which we have put to dealing with domestic and sexual violence. It is not for me to speak for the Health Minister — when we have one — as to the priorities of that Department. I believe that the work that we are doing, which has been outlined to the

Committee, whether on issues like the court listing arrangements, looking at domestic homicide reviews or looking at disclosure arrangements, is important for my Department to carry through. We will continue to do that work whilst hoping that we can get agreement about a joined-up strategy that will be fully comprehensive and better meet the needs of society.

Mr Dallat: I have listened very carefully to the Minister from this gathering of exclusively male political intellectuals. I just wonder whether he accepts that the vast majority of domestic violence cases are against women? Does he recognise the wonderful work of Women's Aid, and has he sought its advice on putting together a strategy that might well address a very serious problem that, for most of the time, is kept quiet and under the carpet?

Mr Ford: Mr Dallat recounts that this is currently an exclusively male gathering, and it appears to be the case. I am sure, however, that he was glued to Radio Ulster at 6.05 pm last Friday to hear his colleague Dolores Kelly discuss the issue of domestic violence with me. Indeed, he might have noticed how full of praise Mrs Kelly was for the work that is being done by the DOJ, and I am sad that he did not manage to quote that. It is certainly the case that the vast majority of victims of domestic and sexual violence are female, or, indeed, their children. They also suffer, whether directly or indirectly, because of violence in the home. On that basis, my understanding is that, as the strategy was being prepared, Women's Aid was one of a number of organisations that contributed. The challenge at this stage is not to have prepared the strategy but to put it into action. That is why, as I said to Mr McCartney, the DOJ is doing what it can on its responsible actions, but we really need agreement from the Minister of Health and the Executive, in a fully working arrangement, to ensure that we can carry the strategy forward in a comprehensive way.

Mr McCarthy: Does the Minister agree that the lack of Executive agreement on a domestic and sexual violence strategy is a direct consequence of the DUP's crazy in-out shenanigans over its ministerial responsibilities?

Mr Ford: I thank Mr McCarthy for his question. The current position is a consequence of the in-out ministerial thing, where, sadly, for a few minutes a week, we seem to have a Minister of Health, and so on. The Minister of Health has not found time to engage on the issue. Unfortunately, however, there were issues before now, and we did not deal with the matter as speedily as we should have done. I believe that my Department did all that it could on the work on the joint strategy but it is not for me to speak for the Department of Health. I just want to see Ministers back at work, the Executive functioning, the strategy agreed and all the action plans — the health bits as well as the justice bits, and also those bits that relate to other Departments in smaller areas — fully implemented.

Domestic Violence

Debate on the Children Services Co-operation Bill

Raymond McCartney (SF) asked the Minister of Justice for an update on the Strategy for Addressing Domestic Violence & Abuse.

Full debate can be read here:

<http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2015/10/19&docID=246357>

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Written Assembly Questions

Issues	Question	Answer								
School Uniform Grants	Peter Weir (DUP) asked the Minister of Education to detail (i) how many families availed of the school uniform grant in 2015; and (ii) how this compares with each of the last three years.	<p>The number of families in receipt of the school uniform grant in the last four school years is as follows:</p> <table border="1"> <tbody> <tr> <td>2011/12</td> <td>48,360</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2012/13</td> <td>50,345</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2013/14</td> <td>52,744</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2014/15</td> <td>59,045</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>The Education Authority has also advised that to date 50,773 families have had uniform grants approved for the current school year. Applications for 2015/16 are still being processed.</p>	2011/12	48,360	2012/13	50,345	2013/14	52,744	2014/15	59,045
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	Robin Swann (UUP) asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail how many women between the ages of 25 and 55 have enrolled in further education colleges, in each of the last 3 years.	<p>The number of women aged 25-55 who enrolled in further education colleges in each of the three academic years was as follows:</p> <p>2011/12: 34,793 2012/13: 33,998 2013/14: 32,218</p>								
Free School Meals	Michael McGimpsey (UUP) asked the Minister of Education whether he has any plans to introduce free school meals for all children as a method for addressing educational underachievement.	<p>I have no plans to introduce free school meals (FSM) for all children as a method for addressing educational underachievement. FSM are provided to ensure that those children most in need have access to a nutritionally balanced meal suitable as the main meal of the day. FSM entitlement is used as a measure of social disadvantage and evidence indicates that socioeconomic status has an impact upon the overall attainment of school children. However, evidence does not indicate that introducing FSM for all children would be a cost effective or targeted approach to addressing educational underachievement.</p>								

<p>Early Years</p>	<p>Claire Sugden (Ind) asked the Minister of Education for an update on the Pathways Fund and the Early Years fund.</p>	<p>The Pathway Fund will be introduced from April 2016. Procurement for the Fund Administrator is underway with Central Procurement Directorate (CPD) DFP, which is a Centre of Procurement Expertise (CoPE). The aim is to engage the Fund Administrator from December 2015 to allow sufficient time for development of the Fund so that it becomes fully operational with awards made from 1 April 2016. This will allow for the seamless closure of the Early Years Fund in its current form. In order that the inequity of the current Early Years Fund is not perpetuated, the Pathway Fund will be open to all providers of Early Years education (aged 0-4) to apply. The criteria for funding are currently being developed and they will align with DE's strategic objectives, with the aim of ensuring that high quality provision can be supported in areas of greater disadvantage. Officials wrote to current Early Years Fund recipients in July 2015 to advise them of the creation of the Pathway Fund.</p>
<p>Transgender facilities at Stormont</p>	<p>Phil Flangan (SF) asked the Assembly Commission to detail what changes will be made to Parliament Buildings to meet the needs of transgender visitors in relation to toilet facilities.</p>	<p>Parliament Buildings currently has separate male and female toilet facilities and disabled toilet provision on each of its 6 floors. In addition, on the Ground Floor there is a Changing Places facility which provides toilet and changing facilities for persons with severe disabilities.</p> <p>Transgender visitors may use the facilities which they consider most suitable to their circumstances and stage of transition.</p> <p>At present there are no plans to make any changes to toilet facilities specifically to meet the needs of transgender visitors.</p> <p>The Assembly Commission, via the Employee Relations Group (ERG), plans to develop a transgender policy that will address how we manage and support staff and how we deal with visitors to Parliament Buildings.</p>
<p>Childcare</p>	<p>Claire Sugden (Ind) asked the First & Deputy First Minister to detail the £12 million childcare budget allocated in 2011.</p>	<p>When the Executive's Childcare Fund was established in 2011 it was envisaged that it would provide all departments who have a role in childcare with an opportunity to deliver against improving the affordability and accessibility of quality childcare. With the launch of "Bright Start" the first phase of the Childcare Strategy in 2013, the Childcare Strategy Programme Board agreed that the Fund should be used strategically to meet priority needs, notably the need for school age childcare. To date, we have spent £4.2 million from Central Funds. This approach will maximise the impact of the £12m Fund, delivering long term benefits that address real childcare needs. The balance will continue to be used to resource the Key First Actions contained in Bright Start. A full break down of spending to date on Bright Start (Key First Actions) implementation is shown below.</p>

Refugees

Benefit cap

Andy Allen (UUP) asked the Minister of Education to detail what resources will be given to schools to accommodate Syrian refugees.

Jim Allister (TUV) asked the Minister for Social Development whether his Department has estimated the number of families that will be affected if a £20,000 benefit cap is applied.

Financial Year	Spend
2011/12	£322,000
2012/13	£1,482,000
2013/14	£692,000
2014/15	£934,975
2015/16 (April-September)	£775,000

The current financial position is that the UK Government will provide some additional funding to the Executive to meet the needs of any refugees received under the Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme in their first year. The operational details of how the Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme will work here have not yet been finalised. The detail of this funding and resourcing for future years is under consideration, and the subject of ongoing discussion with the Home Office. Local schools who have pupils designated as Newcomer receive an additional factor of approximately £1000 per pupil. The Inclusion and Diversity Service is also funded by my Department to provide support for newcomers in schools and key services include interpreting and translation services, a multi-lingual website for teacher and parents and toolkits for diversity in the primary school.

My Department has estimated that approximately 3,200 households would be affected if a Benefit Cap limit of £20,000 (£13,400 for single person households) was applied in Northern Ireland.

The information provided is an Official Statistic. The Production and dissemination of all such Statistics is governed by the Principles and Protocols of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. This is enforced by the UK Statistics Authority.

Surestart

Peter Weir (DUP) asked the Minister of Education for an update on any proposals to expand the geographical coverage of Sure Start.

The Sure Start Programme is targeted towards children in the 20% most deprived areas, and I have been able to expand these services into the 25% most deprived areas, significantly increasing the annual funding to around £25million. In times of constrained finances it is increasingly important to ensure that money is spent on activities which are helping to secure improved well-being and developmental outcomes for children and families in the most disadvantaged areas. Findings from the Independent Review of Sure Start (2014), together with existing research, provide reassurance that our targeting of available resource in areas of highest deprivation is likely to have greatest impact on those children and families that can benefit most from Sure Start services. Given the evidence of the high return on investment of intervention with socially disadvantaged children in the early years, the focus of the Sure Start Programme here will continue to be on the most disadvantaged areas, where the most positive and beneficial outcomes for children can be realised.

Women's Centres Childcare Fund

Claire Sugden (Ind) asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the sustainability of the Women's Centre Childcare Fund.

Since 2006, the Women's Centres Childcare Fund has continued as an emergency funding package pending development, by OFMdFM, of a new childcare strategy, which is currently the subject of consultation. In the context of the childcare strategy I have indicated that this will be the last year of funding under WCCF.

Motions

Issue		Motion
Tax Credits	Mr Phil Flanagan (Sinn Fein)	<p><i>That this Assembly notes the reliance of thousands of low- and middle-earning families on the tax credits system to top up their earnings; deplores the recent attack by the British Government on the tax credits system, which will reduce further the income of thousands of working families and drive them into greater poverty, as well as making it more difficult for people to move into employment; further notes the proposed introduction of an increased minimum wage by the British Government but recognises the study by the Institute for Fiscal Studies that shows that the impact of cuts to the tax credits system is much greater than the increase proposed in the minimum wage, which falls significantly short of the wage required for someone to have a decent standard of living.</i></p> <p><i>Full debate here:</i> http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2015/10/13&docID=245608</p>

Assembly Business

Issue		
Children's Services Co-operation Bill	Steven Agnew (Green Party)	<i>Further consideration stage of the Children's Services Co-operation Bill</i> <i>Full debate here:</i> http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/report.aspx?&eveDate=2015/10/19&docID=246357