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## **UK Commission on Child Poverty and Social Mobility**

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister when they will appoint representatives to the UK Commission on Child Poverty and Social Mobility.

(AQW 23501/11-15)

**Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness (The First Minister and deputy First Minister):**

This matter is currently under consideration.

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## **Childcare Strategy: Welfare Reform**

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what guarantee they can give that the childcare strategy will be published and implemented before the introduction of the provisions contained in the Welfare Reform Bill.

(AQW 27555/11-15)

**Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness:** “Bright Start” was launched on 25 September 2013. The first phase of the Bright Start Strategy sets out a strategic direction and lists 15 key first actions that will be put in place to address the main childcare priorities identified during consultation and research. All key actions will be initiated in 2013/14. The Executive has yet to conclude its discussions on Welfare Reform.

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## Child Poverty

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the forecast by the Institute for Fiscal Studies that child poverty is set to increase significantly by 2020 based on their current policy interventions;

- (i) whether they intend to maintain the income based measurement of child poverty;
- (ii) whether they intend to meet their statutory targets to reduce child poverty under the Child Poverty Act; and
- (iii) what additional progressive interventions they intend to undertake to meet these obligations.

(AQW 28987/11-15)

**Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness:** The report by the Institute of Fiscal Studies (IFS) on Child and Working-Age Poverty in Northern Ireland from 2010 to 2020, published in May 2013, was commissioned by our Department to inform our work to tackle poverty and disadvantage. These projections are necessarily subject to uncertainties and limitations, which are noted in the report. IFS is working on an update using more recent data and we hope to publish in the New Year.

We are required, under the Child Poverty Act 2010, to publish a Child Poverty Strategy that contributes to meeting the targets set out in the Act, which are measured by household income. We published the Executive's Child Poverty Strategy, Improving Children's Life Chances, in March 2011. In pursuit of the targets required by the Act, this Strategy sets out two key strands of work to address the causes and consequences of child poverty: reducing poorly paid work and unemployment amongst adults with children; and improving longer-term prospects through child-based interventions which are designed to tackle the cyclical nature of child poverty. Annual reports on progress were produced in 2012 and 2013 and are available on our department's website.

We are required to adhere to the Child Poverty Act and report progress against its targets and measures until 2020. In addition, in the Programme for Government 2011-15, the Executive made a commitment to deliver a range of measures to tackle poverty and social exclusion through the Delivering Social Change Framework. This was a new approach to tackling multi-generational poverty, based on additional, strategic actions which can make a difference, ultimately with a view to improving long-term outcomes.

Delivering Social Change represents a new level of collaborative working across departments. We have sought to drive real initiatives which will have genuine impact on the ground through our seven Delivering Social Change Signature programmes. Teachers are being recruited to deliver tuition to primary school pupils who are struggling with reading and maths at Key Stage 2 and post-primary pupils who are not projected to get a 'C' grade in English or Maths. Twenty additional Nurture Units are being created in local primary schools to help address barriers to learning among children arising from social, emotional or behavioural difficulties. Trained staff will select the children who will benefit most from additional support and develop individual learning plans agreed with parents and teachers. Parenting programmes have been developed which will provide support to new parents living in areas of deprivation. Sixteen existing Family Support Hubs are receiving additional support to provide early intervention family support services and 10 new Hubs will be established by April 2014. A targeted intervention programme to support young people who are not in Education, Employment or Training and their families will also be rolled out; providing work placements, skills training and employment advice. The programmes will also see investment in local communities. Eleven Social Enterprise Hubs will offer business advice and practical support to social enterprise entrepreneurs to encourage social enterprise business start-ups within local communities and £1.6 million is being invested to enhance play and leisure opportunities.

In addition, we continue to commission research to identify best practice and inform our work to tackle child poverty. In October, we published a Child Poverty Outcomes Framework, developed by the National Children's Bureau and the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes, to support a cross-departmental approach to reduce child poverty. This Framework seeks to identify interventions which will improve outcomes. We are currently reviewing our Child Poverty Strategy and using the Child Poverty Outcomes Framework to develop a new strategy, under the banner of Delivering Social Change, to improve outcomes for all of our children.

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## Children Abuse via the Internet

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what action their Department and its arm's length bodies are taking to protect children from abuse through the internet. (AQW 29147/11-15)

**Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness:** We recognise that while the internet offers new opportunities for children to expand their knowledge and experience, it also brings risks. The Executive is committed to ensuring children and young people are protected from abuse including through the internet.

Over the last year, OFMDFM has taken forward a range of actions to protect children from abuse through the internet, including:

- the commissioning of research to gain a better understanding of internet use by P7 pupils;
- engagement with the UK Safer Internet Centre, including involvement in Safer Internet Day activities on 5 February 2013; and
- a review of activity on internet safety across relevant departments to identify current actions, gaps and any further actions that may be required to address risks.

We have used existing cross-departmental structures such as the Delivering Social Change Programme Board and Children's Champions to ensure work is co-ordinated across the Executive. In addition, OFMDFM has contributed to work which is being taken forward by the Safeguarding Board for Northern Ireland to evaluate the effectiveness of current internet safety messages for children and young people, parents and practitioners. Junior Ministers have also met the Adviser to the EU Commissioner for the Digital Agenda to consider how we could work with the EU to address the issue of child internet safety, including raising awareness of cyber bullying.

In light of its concerns over internet safety, the NI Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) has updated its 'Social Media Policy' and its 'Social Media Guidelines' in relation to the participation of children and young people. NICCY's Legal and Investigations Department deals with casework on a daily basis, some of which involve issues in relation to internet safety.

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## **Bright Start Community Childcare Programme**

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how 3000 childcare places will be provided by social enterprise through the Bright Start Community Childcare Programme.

(AQW 29228/11-15)

**Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness:** We propose to sustain or create the 3,000 childcare places for school age children through a grant funding scheme. The detail of the proposed grant scheme is currently in development with a view to launching early in 2014.

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## **Bright Start Strategy**

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for a breakdown of the budget for programmes provided for in the Bright Start Strategy.

(AQW 29230/11-15)

**Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness:** The Department continues to work on the detailed costings for several of the key first actions set out in the first phase of Bright Start. As a consequence, we are not in a position to provide a breakdown of the budget for each of the programmes in Bright Start. However, we are intending on making more details available on this shortly.

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## **Bright Start Strategy**

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister how the need for the number of extra childcare places being provided for under the Bright Start Strategy was established.

(AQW 29231/11-15)

**Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness:** Bright Start's key first actions aim to address the priority childcare needs that were identified during public consultation and research. These needs included a lack of provision for school age children; for children with disabilities; and for children in rural areas. The additional childcare places envisaged

under the first phase of Bright Start represent a major step towards addressing these needs. [Back to Top](#)

## Bright Start Childcare Information Programme

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to provide further detail on the Bright Start Childcare Information Programme.

(AQW 29232/11-15)

**Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness:** Under the first phase of the Bright Start Childcare Strategy, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) is enhancing the Family Support NI website. This includes a new childcare specific search facility that is already operational. The facility enables parents to search for childcare services in their area and filter the results by a number of categories – eg the type of childcare being provided, any current vacancies, and the hours during which the childcare services are available.

DHSSPS has also commissioned a social media application. This will replicate the Family Support NI information and enable parents to search for childcare services using smart phones.

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## Delivering Social Change: Child Poverty

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what measures will be incorporated as part of delivering social change to address child poverty.

(AQW 29353/11-15)

**Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness:** Delivering Social Change is about reducing poverty and associated issues, across all ages; and an improvement in children and young people's health, wellbeing and life opportunities, breaking the cycle of multi-generational problems.

Six Delivering Social Change Signature Programmes, specifically focused on children and families, are currently being implemented to address the causes and consequences of poverty. In October, we announced a seventh Signature Programme to enhance play and leisure opportunities for children and young people. A range of possible future initiatives are also under consideration.

We are currently reviewing our Child Poverty Strategy, Improving Children's Life Chances, and aim to publish a new strategy, setting out future measures to address child poverty under the banner of Delivering Social Change, in March 2014.

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### **Planning, Commissioning and Delivery of Children's Services**

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether they have any plans to improve the integration of planning, commissioning and delivery of children's services; and to provide further details.

(AQW 29401/11-15)

**Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness:** Direct responsibility for the planning, commissioning and delivery of children's services falls within the remit of the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety. However, the Member will be aware of the work we are taking forward through the Delivering Social Change framework to provide a co-ordinated approach across the Executive to reduce poverty and bring about improvements in children and young people's health, well-being and life opportunities.

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### **Historical Institutional Abuse Inquiry**

Mr Givan asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse led by Justice Hart.

(AQO 5252/11-15)

**Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness:** The Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse has been up and running since October 2012, when its confidential Acknowledgement Forum began hearing accounts from victims and survivors. Of course, the Inquiry is independent from government and, subject to the Inquiry into Historical Institutional Abuse Act and Rules, the procedure and conduct of the Inquiry are directed by the Chairperson. However, we note that applications from those victims and survivors who wished to be heard by the Inquiry closed on Friday 29 November 2013. Over that 14-month period, the Inquiry has received 433 applications. The Inquiry will commence its oral hearings in the

former Banbridge Courthouse today. This will focus on opening statements by the Chairperson Sir Anthony Hart and Christine Smith QC, Senior Counsel to the Inquiry. Hearings will initially focus on Institutions at Termonbacca and Sisters of Nazareth, Bishop Street Derry/Londonderry. The dates for the subsequent hearings will be announced by the Inquiry in due course. The Inquiry's terms of reference anticipate that it will have completed all its work by January 2016.

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## Suicide Prevention

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to outline any plans to provide additional support for suicide prevention.

(AQO 5286/11-15)

**Ms Ní Chuilín:** My Department has made a significant contribution in promoting mental well-being and awareness of suicide prevention through Sport, the Arts and Libraries. This includes:

- The DCAL Strategy for Sport: 'Sport Matters' which is a key contributor to the DHSSPS Suicide Prevention Strategy, Protect Life.
- A commitment to pilot a programme of suicide awareness and prevention training in two areas of the north identified as having high levels of suicide.
- I have also provided funding of £500k per year, for the period 2012/13 to 2014/15 to the IFA for a Health Programme, part of which will address issues around suicide awareness.
- DCAL provided £42k through Sport NI to deliver an awareness programme to support the existing Public Health Agency campaign and carrying the "Minding Your Head" message.
- The Libraries NI Health in Mind programme, in partnership with mental health charities, provides positive mental health and wellbeing information.
- The Arts Council's Youth Arts Strategy includes a commitment to pilot a youth sector initiative aimed at young people at risk of poor mental health.

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## Sure Start Programme: Percentage of Children

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education what percentage of children attended a Sure Start programme in each of the last five years; and how much was spent on Sure Start in each year.

(AQW 29283/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** Sure Start is a programme targeted at parents and children under the age of 4 living in the top 20% most disadvantaged wards in the north. DE delivers the Sure Start programme through the Health and Social Care Board (HSCB), which has operational responsibility for the delivery of Sure Start.

During 2012/13 HSCB developed and implemented a Sure Start database (Sure Start Play) funded by DE, to ensure future effective monitoring of activity within Sure Start projects from 2012/13 onwards. Information on how many children were registered until the establishment of the database is not held centrally by DE or the HSCB and will have been collated in different ways by the various projects.

In respect of 2013/14 there are 127,324 children aged 0-4 living in the north of Ireland (Source NISRA 2012 Mid Years Population Estimates). 27% of those children (34191) are registered with Sure Start projects.

The budget for the Sure Start programme over the past 5 years was:  
Sure Start budget (£m)

2008/09	2009/10	2010/11	2011/12	2012/13
17.561	20.666	21.935	21.600	22.352

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## **Schools: Defibrillators and Staff**

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Education what action he is taking to ensure that each school has a defibrillator and adequately trained staff to use the equipment.

(AQW 29448/11-15)

**Mr O’Dowd:** The decision on the part of a school to acquire a defibrillator and train staff in its use is a matter for each school individually. The health and safety of pupils and staff is the responsibility of the school management, accountable in the first instance to the Board of Governors.

I have no plans to place any requirement upon schools in this regard. However, I would refer the Member to my answer to the recent Written Assembly Question (29447/11-15) which details the current work of the joint Education and Library Board/CCMS working group on the use of automated external defibrillators in schools in this regard.

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## **Growth of Integrated Education**

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister of Education how his Department has discharged its statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the growth of integrated education further to the enactment of Article 69(1) of the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989.

(AQW 29517/11-15)

**Mr O’Dowd:** Firstly, I should clarify that the statutory duty (placed on the Department of Education) to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education sits within Article 64 of the Education Reform (NI) Order 1989.

I take the Department of Education’s statutory duty to encourage and facilitate the development of integrated education (that is to say, the education together, at school, of Protestant and Roman Catholic pupils), very seriously. The integrated sector continues to grow. In 2011, the schools’ census indicated that there were 21,170 pupils attending 42 primary, and 20 post-primary integrated schools here. This has increased to 21,301 pupils according to the 2012 census figures. To help discharge the statutory duty, my Department provides funding to the Council for Integrated Education (NICIE) to assist with the encouragement and promotion of integrated education. A budget of £646k has been allocated for 2013/14.

In addition, DE also provides funding to help schools with the process of transformation to integrated status. This assists schools in the initial stages of the transformation process, and with the employment of a teacher from the minority community in the school to assist with religious education.

The budget available for 2013/14 is £185k. I recognise the vital and valuable contribution that the integrated sector, together with all sectors of education, makes to building a peaceful and stable future for our children. Going forward, the Department of Education will ensure that it continues to have a rigorous approach to its duty to integrated education.

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## South Eastern Education and Library Board Area: Educational Psychologists

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Education to detail the (i) longest; and (ii) average waiting time between a pupil being referred to an educational psychologist and having their first appointment, since June 2013, in the South Eastern Education and Library Board Area. (AQW 29548/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** The South Eastern Education and Library Board has confirmed that the longest and the average waiting time between a pupil being referred to an educational psychologist and having their first appointment, during the period 3 June 2013 to 31 December 2013, is as follows:

Longest Waiting Time – 298 days\*

Average Waiting Time – 116 days

\*In some cases, such as very young pre-school children already in receipt of ongoing developmental and therapeutic support, it is accepted good practice to carry out the educational psychology assessment after the child has had this support so that the child's response to intervention can be taken into account as part of a comprehensive special educational needs assessment.

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## Education and Library Boards: School Choice

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education whether a parent is compelled to comply with the choice of school for a child as directed by the Education and Library Board.

(AQW 29637/11-15)

**Mr O’Dowd:** Education and Library Boards support parents in finding a school for their child both during, and after, the open enrolment processes (which place children in a school). If a child’s preferences have been exhausted, the Education and Library Board will supply the parents with a list of alternative schools with places available and ask them to make a further school selection. If at the end of the process a child remains unplaced, their parents are advised to identify a preference for one of the schools with places available in order to ensure that their child will be placed in time for the beginning of the school term.

Details of children un-placed and not attending school after the start of the school year are forwarded to the Education Welfare Service, as it then becomes an attendance issue. An Education Welfare Officer will contact the family and offer advice and support to enable the family to reach a decision.

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## Home Tuition

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education to outline the circumstances that home tuition, provided by qualified teachers, is legally permissible as an alternative to school tuition.

(AQW 29638/11-15)

**Mr O’Dowd:** Home tuition is not an alternative to full-time school attendance. It can reduce the impact of disruption upon a child’s education but cannot provide the same breadth and quality of learning that school attendance would provide. Education and Library Boards (ELBs) operate their Home Tuition services as part of their responsibility under Article 86 of the Education (NI) Order 1998, to provide ‘education otherwise than at school’ (EOTAS) for ‘those children of compulsory school age who by reason of illness, expulsion or suspension from school or otherwise, may not for any period receive suitable education unless such arrangements are made for them’.

Within the range of EOTAS services ELBs provide, home tuition is most frequently offered to support pupils recuperating from a long illness, enabling them to keep in touch with learning until they return to school. Its provision is normally limited to a few hours per week and should be supplemented with additional support from the child's registered school.

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### Home-To-School Transport Policy

Mrs Cochrane asked the Minister of Education whether a full feasibility study concerning the provision of free public transport for all school pupils will be carried out within the review of the home-to-school transport policy, launched by his Department in December 2013; and if so, whether this will be undertaken in consultation with the Department for Regional Development.

(AQW 29809/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** As outlined in my reply to you in AQW 23442/11-15 which was published in the Official Report on 24 May 2013, the feasibility of providing free public transport for all school pupils will be considered as part of a wider Review of Home to School Transport policy.

The Review was launched on 2 December 2013. As part of the terms of reference for the Review, I asked the Panel to consider the option of providing free public transport to all school pupils. Given the independent nature of the Panel, it would be inappropriate for me to dictate how the Review is conducted and, therefore, it is wholly a matter for the Panel to determine what actions they feel are necessary in order to fulfil the Terms of Reference of the Review. The Panel is due to report its recommendations to me by the end of August 2014.

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## Education Bill

Mrs Overend asked the Minister of Education to outline the reasons for the delay in bringing forward the next stage of the Education Bill.

(AQO 5298/11-15)

**Mr O’Dowd:** The Education Bill completed its Committee Stage on 8 April, 2013. The Bill cannot advance to Consideration Stage without the agreement of the Executive. This remains outstanding.

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## SEN Assessment: Waiting Time

Mr McQuillan asked the Minister of Education to outline the average waiting time for an assessment for Special Educational Needs in each Education and Library Board area.

(AQO 5301/11-15)

**Mr O’Dowd:** Legislation requires an Education and Library Board to complete a statutory assessment of a child’s special educational needs in no more than 26 weeks, allowing for valid exceptions. This period of time allows for a detailed assessment to be undertaken with input commissioned from the pupil’s parents or guardians and a range of educational and health professionals if appropriate.

The Boards have advised that the average number of weeks taken for completing a statutory assessment and finalising a statement of special education needs in the academic year 2012/13, allowing for valid exceptions, is as follows:-

- Belfast Education and Library Board - 21 weeks
- North Eastern Education and Library Board - 20 weeks
- South Eastern Education and Library Board - 24 weeks
- Southern Education and Library Board - 22 weeks
- Western Education and Library Board - 22 weeks

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## Free School Meals

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education to outline the options his Department has considered in determining future eligibility for Free School Meals under Universal Credit. (AQO 5302/11-15)

**Mr O’Dowd:** If the Welfare Reform Bill as currently drafted progresses through the Assembly, it is intended that Universal Credit (UC) will be introduced here on a phased basis during 2014. It is proposed that Universal Credit will replace a number of existing social welfare benefits which are used to determine eligibility for free school meals and uniform grants. Therefore, it has been necessary to identify alternative options for free school meal eligibility criteria under Universal Credit.

In developing these options my priority is to ensure that children from lower income households do not lose out following the introduction of Universal Credit here. The potential options which I am considering in this regard are based on an applicant being in receipt of Universal Credit combined with various household income thresholds. I am also considering options for transitional protection based on the provision of such protection for various time periods. I consider that the options currently under development will ensure that free school meals, as a key passported benefit, continue to provide support to those families who are most in need. Subject to progress with the Welfare Reform Bill it is my intention to consult on these options in due course.

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## OECD Education Report

Mr Dunne asked the Minister of Education what actions he proposes to take in light of the recent Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development report on the local education system. (AQO 5304/11-15)

**Mr O’Dowd:** In November 2012, I announced that we would participate in an OECD review of evaluation and assessment frameworks for improving school outcomes. I felt that we could learn from the experience of others and drive improvements in educational outcomes. I welcome the publication of the OECD Report on Evaluation and Assessment in Education; it is a detailed and comprehensive report, which outlines a number of strengths and challenges in our system.

I, along with other education stakeholders, will be giving careful consideration to this report along with the recently published results from the Programme for International Assessment (PISA) 2012 Study. International benchmarking of our education system in this way provides valuable evidence which helps to inform the development of education policies in line with my Ministerial priorities. I intend making a formal statement in due course, on evaluation and assessment, which will include a strategic response to this report and an outline of the future of GCSE and A-Level qualifications here. The statement will set the future direction for qualifications and assessment in the north.

I shall continue to encourage stakeholders to examine the report, and my Department has arranged for a workshop at which one of the authors will be making a presentation and facilitating discussion of the report's findings.

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## Common Funding Formula

Mr Cree asked the Minister of Education to outline the outcome of the consultation on proposed changes to the Common Funding Formula.  
(AQO 5305/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** The changes to the Common Funding Scheme (CFS) remain on track for delivery for the new financial year. At the closing date of 25 October, nearly 15,000 consultation responses were received to the main consultation, evidence of real engagement.

A full analysis of those responses is currently underway and I will give careful consideration to the views of all those who responded before making my final decisions. And I will arrange for a consultation summary to be published on the DE website, shared with the Education Committee and placed in the Assembly Library in due course.

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## Opportunities for Armed Forces Veterans

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the opportunities his Department has made available to Armed Forces Veterans injured in combat over the past 3 years.

(AQW 29356/11-15)

**Dr Farry:** My Department has adopted the Higher Education Scholarship, which was introduced by the coalition Government in October 2010 from academic year 2011/2012. The aim of the scheme is to give the children of those killed in the service of their country a head start in life by giving them the opportunity to gain a higher education qualification.

The scheme will be open to all children for whom the deceased person had legal parental responsibility at the time of death, and biological children born within the 10 months after the death. The scheme is to include those bereaved since 0001 hours on 1 January 1990 and is available in the UK only. The scholarship in Northern Ireland will be set at £7,325 for academic year 2013/2014; this is based on, but not tied to, the sum of tuition fees and maintenance loan.

In cooperation with the Ministry of Defence, my Department will also be introducing the Further and Higher Education Commitment Scheme in Northern Ireland. The Scheme will pay the tuition fees of service leavers who are resident in Northern Ireland when they are studying for a first full level 3 qualification, a first undergraduate or foundation degree, or a first HNC or HND.

My Department is also in discussions with the Ministry of Defence in regard to implementing the Enhanced Learning Credit Scheme in Northern Ireland. The Scheme will give financial help to qualifying service leavers with up to three payments towards the cost of 'higher level learning', namely achieving a qualification at level 3 or above such as an NVQ 3, A-level, HNC, foundation or ordinary degree or equivalent qualification.

Through its Disability Employment Service, my Department provides a range of programmes and services aimed at helping people with disabilities progress towards, move into, and sustain employment. This includes: specialist pre-employment support to help build confidence and prepare the person for work; financial assistance to purchase special aids and equipment; and longer term support to assist with travel to work and other in-work provision to both the disabled employee and their employer, as necessary.

Similar measures are also in place to support persons with disabilities who participate in the Department's training programmes, ApprenticeshipsNI and Training for Success.

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### Reductions in Expenditure in Welfare Reform

Mr Campbell asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel, pursuant to AQW 28846/11-15, and given the recent statement by the Chancellor of the Exchequer regarding future reductions in expenditure in Welfare Reform, what are the financial implications in addition to the current extra cost of £5 million per month.

(AQW 29605/11-15)

**Mr Hamilton (The Minister of Finance and Personnel):** The penalties applied to the Northern Ireland Executive are reflective of the additional costs being incurred by the UK Government as a consequence of welfare policy in Northern Ireland not aligning to that in the rest of the United Kingdom. Whilst the penalty currently stands at £5 million a month, it is expected that this will increase significantly as welfare reforms are rolled out in Great Britain and will reach an estimated £200 million per annum by 2017-18.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer recently indicated that it would be necessary to make further savings in welfare costs after the next General Election. This has the potential to further increase the disparity between welfare systems in Great Britain and Northern Ireland should we not implement similar reforms. As a consequence, the penalties applied to the Northern Ireland Executive would increase.

In addition to the penalties applied by the UK Government, the Northern Ireland Executive will incur significant IT and administrative costs if our welfare system is not aligned to the rest of the United Kingdom.

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## Healthy Start Scheme: Pregnant Women

Ms Maeve McLaughlin asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether additional measures can be implemented to ensure pregnant women have access to the Healthy Start scheme.

(AQW 29533/11-15)

**Mr Poots:** The Healthy Start Scheme is a nutritional safety net for low-income families. The Scheme is open to those who are at least 10 weeks pregnant or have a child under 4 years old, are in receipt of certain benefits, and have an annual family income of £16,190 or less. All pregnant women under the age of 18 qualify for the Scheme, whether or not they are on benefits.

Information about the availability of Healthy Start is included in leaflets and in online information about benefits and tax credits. Details on Healthy Start are contained in 'The Pregnancy Book' which is supplied to all pregnant women at first booking appointment and 'The Birth to Five Book' which is supplied to all mothers leaving the maternity unit. This information is also available online at [www.healthystart.nhs.uk](http://www.healthystart.nhs.uk) and [www.nidirect.gov.uk](http://www.nidirect.gov.uk). My Department continues to actively look for ways of signposting the Scheme and issues regular Information Updates on Healthy Start for Health and Social Care health professionals.

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## Definition of Young People

Mr Agnew asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 29502/11-15, whether the legal definition of young people in the Housing (Northern Ireland) Order 1988, the definition of young people in the Commissioner for Children and Young People Order 2003 or the definition of young people in disability legislation is applicable to the functions of the Children's and Young People's strategic partnership, as outlined in The NI Children and Young People's Plan 2011-14, Appendix 2, Section 2.2.

(AQW 29600/11-15)

**Mr Poots:** Section 2.2 (e) of Appendix 2 to The Northern Ireland Children and Young People's Plan 2011-14 specifies that the age group of children and young people addressed by the Children's and Young People's Strategic Partnership (CYPSP) and its

planning groups is 0-18 years, extended for young people who have been Looked After, those who are homeless and those who have a disability.

While section 2.2(e) of the Plan does not specify an upper age limit, it is clear that the CYPSP can and does act on behalf of disabled children, looked after children and those who are homeless beyond age 18. It is possible, therefore, that this is in keeping with the definitions of a young person contained in the legislation cited above, which extend the definition of young person to age 21.

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## **Review of the Allied Health Professional Support for Children and Young People with Statements of Special Educational Needs in Special Schools and Mainstream Education**

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the scope of the Review of the Allied Health Professional Support for Children and Young People with Statements of Special Educational Needs in Special Schools and Mainstream Education.

(AQW 29707/11-15)

**Mr Poots:** The initial phase of the review is a scoping exercise which will establish the level of Allied Health Professions (AHP) provision and support for children with special educational needs in special schools and mainstream education. The focus in the first year of the review will be on establishing a baseline of current arrangements, identification of themes and agreeing recommendations for further action. Thereafter, the review will agree a regional model, in partnership with key stakeholders, to ensure that the AHP assessed needs of children are met, irrespective of what school they attend. The AHPs to be considered by this review will include:

- Physiotherapy
- Occupational Therapy
- Speech and Language Therapy
- Dietetics
- Orthoptics; and
- Podiatry

There will also be an opportunity for engagement with representatives from other Allied Health Professions, including those providing music therapy.

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### Music Therapy

Mr McGlone asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether music therapy is being considered as part of the Review of the Allied Health Professional Support for Children and Young People with Statements of Special Educational Needs in Special Schools and Mainstream Education.

(AQW 29708/11-15)

**Mr Poots:** The Review's focus is primarily on the services provided by Occupational Therapy, Speech and Language Therapy, Physiotherapy, Dietetics, Orthoptics and Podiatry for children with Statements of Special Educational Needs. In addition, it has been agreed that there will be an opportunity for engagement with representatives from other Allied Health Professions, including those providing music therapy, who work with children with SEN Statements.

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### Family Fund: Funding

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, given the demand for support from the Family Fund, what plans he has to increase the funding available.

(AQW 29741/11-15)

**Mr Poots:** Through funding support of £1.57m provided by my Department to the Family Fund in 2012/13, almost 3000 families in Northern Ireland with disabled children were helped.

Due to the ongoing financial challenges facing my Department I am currently unable to increase their funding provision. However, DHSSPS officials will be meeting with the Family Fund in the near future to further discuss this issue and how best it can help support families in NI. [Back to Top](#)

## Domestic Abuse Bill

Lord Morrow asked the Minister of Justice whether he will bring Northern Ireland in line with the UK in relation to the proposed Domestic Abuse Bill, and if so, when and by what legislation he intends to progress this.

(AQW 29525/11-15)

**Mr Ford:** I am aware of a proposed Domestic Abuse bill which, if introduced, would make domestic abuse a specific offence in England and Wales carrying a sentence of up to 14 years in prison. My officials will liaise with colleagues in the Home Office throughout the passage of the Bill in Westminster and will share developments with the Regional Strategy Group on Domestic and Sexual Violence. The Regional Strategy Group's views will then inform any decision by me on the introduction of similar legislation into Northern Ireland.

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## Universal Credit

Mr Copeland asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the cost to his Department to date, of preparing for the introduction of Universal Credit.

(AQW 29478/11-15)

**Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development):** The Northern Ireland Universal Credit Programme was established in May 2011. The costs incurred in running this Programme are set out below (to the nearest £100k):

- £1.9m in 2011/12 financial year.
- £4.5m in 2012/13 financial year.
- £4m to 30 November in the 2013/14 financial year.

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## Welfare Reform Oversight Board

Mrs D Kelly asked the Minister for Social Development for an update on the work of the Welfare Reform Oversight Board; and whether the Board will produce a report on the Welfare Reform Bill.

(AQW 29594/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** Following my statement to the Assembly on the flexibilities which were secured from Lord Freud on how Universal Credit would be paid in Northern Ireland, I announced the establishment of an Oversight Board chaired by my Department's Permanent Secretary with members from a cross section of representatives from the voluntary and community sector. The Board provides support in developing the criteria to enable the implementation of the different payment flexibilities.

The Board has met on three occasions and considered papers produced by the Universal Credit Programme Team on payment flexibilities policy and implementation issues. The Board has also received feedback from public consultation events which were organised across Northern Ireland to facilitate input from organisations not represented on the Oversight Board as well as political parties and individuals.

At the next meeting it is planned to present the Board with the latest policy and operational thinking taking into account political discussions. The Board will then produce a final report on the criteria for payment flexibilities in Universal Credit.

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