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Strategy Planning and Review Group

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail

- (i) the remit of the Strategy Planning and Review Group (SPRG) for the Children and Young People's Strategy;
- (ii) the dates the SPRG for the Children and Young People's Strategy met, including when each of the Junior Ministers were in attendance.

(AQW 31463/11-15)

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

The Strategy Planning and Review Group (SPRG) was set up in 2008 with a remit

- to review the 2008-11 Action Plan under the Children and Young People's Strategy and to make recommendations taking into account feedback from the Children's Champions Group; Parents' Advisory Group; Research and Information Group; and Practitioners;
- to link the regional and area Children's Services Plans to the Strategy Action Plan;
- to monitor progress on delivery of the strategy action plan; and
- to submit review reports to the Ministerial sub-committee on children and young people.

Membership of the SPRG included senior representatives of statutory, community and voluntary sector organisations and government departments including the Northern Ireland Office and Northern Ireland Courts Service. The Departmental representatives were drawn from the Children and Young People's Inter-departmental Group (IDG) which was set up to oversee the development of the Strategy. The SPRG met on four occasions during the lifetime of the 2008-11 Action Plan, on 10 September 2008, 11 November 2008, 24 March 2009 and 30 November 2010. Junior Ministers attended and chaired all of these meetings. OFMDFM continued to monitor progress on the actions in the Plan up until the end of the Plan in April 2011.

Since then, delivery on the Children and Young People's Strategy has been taken forward under the auspices of the Delivering Social Change (DSC) framework. Progress on the framework is monitored and overseen by DSC Programme Board which reports to the Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children and Young People and the Executive Sub-Committee on Poverty and Social Inclusion.

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Ethnic Minorities

Mr Lyttle asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister what work they have undertaken to assess the extent of ethnic minority poverty further to the Joseph Rowntree Foundation Report on Poverty and Ethnicity finding in February 2013 that ‘the precise household circumstances and relative extent of poverty among minority ethnic groups in Northern Ireland are unknown.

(AQW 32105/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We acknowledge the significant gaps in the knowledge base that have been highlighted by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report. We are, of course, not unique in this. Joseph Rowntree Foundation’s publication Poverty and ethnicity: A review of evidence (May 2011) refers to “weaknesses in the evidence relating to Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales and insufficient exploration of much of England outside London and other major cities”.

We can confirm that the Foundation has undertaken research – with active involvement of OFMDFM officials – to increase our understanding of the links between poverty and ethnicity which will enable us to tackle poverty across different ethnic groups more efficiently. We understand that this research will be published soon.

The consultation document on our new Racial Equality Strategy – “A Sense of Belonging” – proposes a major step to tackle the knowledge gaps: the introduction of ethnic monitoring (the process used to collect, store and analyse data about people’s ethnic backgrounds) for all Government departments, Agencies and local councils. However, we recognise that to obtain sound quantitative data about the attitudes and perceptions of minority ethnic people will present considerable difficulties; the still relatively small proportion of minority ethnic people here means that surveys that rely on sampling are unlikely to yield reliable results. We will not allow these knowledge gaps to delay urgent action. We know already many of the issues that we need to tackle. These include: the language barrier, lack of accessible information, the training needs of staff, the cultural needs of minority ethnic people and issues around occupational segregation. Our officials will use the consultation on “A Sense of Belonging” to gather further information on what minority ethnic people themselves identify as priority areas for action.

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Bright Start Programme

Mr Lynch asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister for an update on the roll out of the School Age Childcare actions under the Bright Start programme.

(AQO 5823/11-15)

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: Junior Ministers launched the Bright Start School Age Childcare Grant Scheme on Thursday 27 March. Three of the 15 Bright Start Key First Actions relate to school age childcare and aim to create or sustain between 5,000 and 7,000 school age childcare places. Our new School Age Childcare Grant Scheme will work to deliver these places by making funding available to support current and potential school age childcare providers who intend to operate on a social economy basis.

Another key first action under Bright Start will be to support up to 1,000 additional childminders. Grants will assist providers to sustain or expand existing school age childcare services, or to set up new services. The Grant Scheme will target areas where there are currently limited school age childcare services and/or services insufficient to meet demand. The Scheme will focus on the childcare needs of disadvantaged families and rural communities and also support the use of the school estate as a base for school age childcare. Its emphasis will be on establishing school age childcare services that are both affordable and sustainable.

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Hydro-Therapy Pool: Castle Tower Special School, Ballymena

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Education what level of support his Department will provide for the installation of a hydro-therapy pool in the new build for Castle Tower Special School, Ballymena.

(AQW 32658/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: My Department is content with the proposal to retain the hydrotherapy pool on the new school campus. The original approved Economic Appraisal (EA) did not include provision of hydrotherapy pool, as recurrent funding elements to be provided by the Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT) could not be confirmed at that time. DE has now received confirmation from NHSCT that this funding will be provided and has requested DFP approval to the option contained in the EA to include the hydrotherapy pool.

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C2K

Mr Rogers asked the Minister of Education to outline the reasons for the difficulties with the latest C2K implementations.

(AQW 32666/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Roll-out of the new C2k contract involves a major upgrade to all school networks and C2k is working with schools to agree a suitable schedule to do this. As the network is typically unavailable for 3-5 days per school while transformation takes place, there are inevitably frustrations and I have asked the Western Education & Library Board to ensure that C2k is responsive to these and taking every possible step to minimise disruption. Those steps include responding positively where possible to requests to postpone transformation until the summer and continuing to offer vital training to C2k Managers within schools prior to their transformation.

If the member has more specific concerns about operational issues in individual schools, I would encourage him to raise these directly with the Chief Executive of the Western Education & Library Board.

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Little Oaks Unit in Foyle

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education to outline the status of the Little Oaks Unit in Foyle; and how many children using the facility are

(a) with and

(b) without statements of educational need.

(AQW 32702/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Little Oaks is a Key Stage 1 and 2 Social, Emotional and Behaviour Difficulties (SEBD) unit operating as part of the Western Education and Library Board (WELB) Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) Service. It also provides outreach support for children referred to, but not yet attending, the unit.

Little Oaks is based on the Belmont House site and the unit is currently managed as part of Belmont Special School. WELB's Children and Young Peoples Services Department, however, manage all aspects of the pupil placement process and, as part of the current development plan for the site; the Board intends to create a new, purpose built SEBD unit, wholly independent from the school, by September 2014. There are currently 25 children using the facility, 8 children have statements of educational needs and 17 children do not. Of the 17 however, 3 are likely to receive statements in the near future.

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Educational Underachievement

Mr Weir asked the Minister of Education what funding is available to combat educational underachievement.

(AQW 32740/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: Since coming to office I have continued to implement policies to raise standards and tackle educational underachievement. Key policies include the school improvement policy, the literacy and numeracy strategy, the revised curriculum, the entitlement framework, the framework for early years' education and learning and the SEN and inclusion review. Alongside these policies the Department is implementing a range of funded programmes targeting educational underachievement.

These include the Delivering Social Change programme to provide additional teaching support to pupils at risk of underachievement, the literacy and numeracy, Continuing Professional Development Key Stage 2/3 project and funding to support Area Learning Communities develop effective approaches to improving literacy and numeracy levels amongst disadvantaged pupils. I am also providing funding to support a range of programmes targeted at socially deprived communities. These include Sure Start, the extended schools and full service provision, the Community Education Initiatives Programme, the Achieving Belfast and Achieving Derry Bright Futures programmes and projects to address educational underachievement in Greater West Belfast.

Last month I announced changes to the way schools are funded in order to target resources at areas of disadvantage. I have redistributed school funding to target schools with high numbers of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds under the common funding scheme and injected a further £10 million into school budgets from April 2014.

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Applicants for Pre-School Places

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Education how many applicants in each constituency were successful for

- (i) full-time; and
- (ii) part-time nursery places.

(AQW 32826/11-15)

Mr O'Dowd: At this stage of the pre-school admissions process, over 95% of children have been offered a pre-school place for the 2014/15 school year, with 86% in their first preference setting.

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Nursery School Places

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education what action he is taking to include working families who are at the lower income earning level in any preferential treatment for nursery school places.

(AQW 32828/11-15)

Mr O’Dowd: All admissions criteria are set by pre-school providers themselves; however legislation requires that the top criterion for each provider prioritises children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. Research has shown that children from socially disadvantaged circumstances tend to experience more difficulty at school than other children, so they are given priority in the pre-school admissions process as part of wider efforts to tackle educational underachievement.

Children from socially disadvantaged circumstances are currently defined as a child whose parent is in receipt of income support, income-based job-seekers allowance, or Employment Support Allowance where an award of income-based job-seekers allowance has been converted and the amount of the award remains unchanged. The Review of Pre-School Admissions recommended that this definition be examined with a view to mirroring the relevant economic elements of the definition of Free School Meal Entitlement and officials are currently developing proposals for my consideration.

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Nursery School Education

Mr Kinahan asked the Minister of Education to outline the timescale for all nursery school education being on a full-time basis.

(AQW 32830/11-15)

Mr O’Dowd: A key action in Learning to Learn – A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning is, over time, to standardise patterns of attendance as part of the Pre-School Education Programme. This action is not restricted to nursery schools. The current pattern of provision for pre-school and the duration of session time can range from 2.5 hours to below 4.5 hours (part-time, with no meal) and 4.5 hours or over (full-time, with a meal) per day. Therefore, a number of options are available when considering standardising patterns of attendance. It is hoped that the exercise of assessing the potential implications of and options for standardizing patterns of attendance, as part of wider considerations of area planning for pre-school provision, will be complete by 2015/16. In the meantime, there is a moratorium on any new or additional full-time provision or conversion from part-time to full-time provision.

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Raising of the School Leaving Age

Mr Moutray asked the Minister of Education what consideration has been given to increasing the school leaving age from 16 years old.

(AQW 32990/11-15)

Mr O’Dowd: Compulsory school leaving age in the north of Ireland is where pupils, who are 16 between 1 September and 1 July (inclusive) in the school year, can leave school on 30 June of that year. Pupils, who become 16 between 2 July and 31 August (inclusive) in any year, cannot leave school until 30 June of the following year. I have currently no plans to change the school leaving age.

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Motions Debated in the Assembly

Mr McNarry asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail

- (i) the number of Motions debated in the Assembly that he has responded to in the last two years; and
- (ii) the action that he has taken following any Motion that was passed.

(AQW 32438/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): In the past two years I have responded to nine Motions. Actions taken following each Motion are attached at Annex A.

Annex A

1. Educational Assistance for Young People

The Executive agreed the Northern Ireland cross-departmental strategy for those young people in the NEET category, 'Pathways to Success', in May 2012. The strategy contains a three tier package of measures aimed at:

- preventing young people missing opportunities for education and training, and/or becoming unemployed;
- helping young people in the 16-18 age group, especially those facing barriers; and
- assisting unemployed young people aged 18-24 more generally.

These measures, specifically designed to meet the needs of young unemployed people throughout Northern Ireland, include: a Collaboration and Innovation Fund; a Community Family Support Programme; a Community Based Access Programme; and a training allowance. The training allowance for young people participating on programmes supported by the European Social Fund, and subsequently also the Collaboration and Innovation Fund, was specifically called for in the debate. Mechanisms were also established for oversight of delivery of the strategy and formal engagement with key stakeholders, including the NEET Advisory Group and the NEET Strategy Forum.

5 and 6. Special Educational Needs Provision

Following Assembly debates regarding provision for students with special educational needs, my Department carried out an audit of further education (FE) provision specifically for students aged 19+ who, as a result of their disability, are unable to participate in mainstream college provision. The findings of the audit were provided to the Committee in September 2013. As you may be aware, the Committee for Employment and Learning has announced its intention to undertake an inquiry into post Special Educational Need

(SEN) Provision in education, employment and training for those with Learning Disabilities in Northern Ireland. I will await the outcomes of the inquiry which will help inform my Department's future strategic direction of Further Education provision for those with a learning difficulty and/or disability. In addressing concerns raised at the debates, DEL has also:

- engaged with the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) over Health and Social Care Trust provision in order to improve provision for young people with disabilities;
- obtained agreement from the Department of Finance and Personnel for a new Social Clause in public sector contracts to support the provision of employment and training opportunities for young people with disabilities;
- increased the level of funding for further education students with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, through the Additional Support Fund (ASF) from £1.5m per annum to £2m. The fund helps provide the additional technical and personal support required by students to participate in mainstream or discrete programmes within further education colleges;
- begun examining the issue of access to transport for young people aged 19 with special education needs who wish to avail of further education provision; and
- raised the issue of transitions for young people with special educational needs at the DHSSPS led Inter Departmental Ministerial meeting on Mental Health and Learning Disability. As a result, DEL is now chairing an inter Departmental Group on transitions, which will report back to the Inter Departmental Ministerial group.

Also, the Department continues to take forward a range of related work which will help address issues raised during the Assembly debates, such as: the review of the Disability Employment Service, which will involve the development of a Disability Employment Strategy; implementation of the Pathways to Success Strategy; and engagement with the Committee for Employment and Learning over its current inquiry into post Special Education Needs Provision in education, employment and training for those with Learning Disabilities in Northern Ireland. This is in addition to other inter departmental activity that supports.

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Skills Shortage

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail the estimated difference in the skills shortage among young people between March 2010 and March 2013.

(AQW 32612/11-15)

Dr Farry: The term ‘skills shortage’ is generally used to refer to a lack of skills in a specific sector or business, that is, that there is a lack of people with the necessary skills to ensure that it can achieve its full economic potential. For the purposes of this answer, I have taken the question to refer to the skills attained by young people during the period specified and the opportunities available to them. It should be noted that my Department is responsible for education and training post-16; young people below that age fall within the remit of the Department of Education.

I am pleased to say that the UK Commission for Employment and Skills’ Employer Skills Survey 2013 showed that Northern Ireland employers’ level of satisfaction with the preparedness for work of 17-18 year old further education leavers and university/higher education leavers was among the highest in the UK. This is reassuring, as a key focus of the work of my Department is aimed at ensuring young people have access to the skills to enable them to participate fully in education, training and work.

The Skills Strategy ‘Success Through Skills – Transforming Futures’, published in 2011, advocates the need to provide training and qualifications that meet the current and future skill needs of employers. This includes the specific goal of increasing the proportion of those qualifying in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects. The STEM Strategy ‘Success Through STEM’ also published in 2011, has aimed to increase the number of young people studying STEM subjects in Northern Ireland.

A number of the Department’s programmes and strategies are helping young people fulfil their potential. The ApprenticeshipsNI programme provides quality training in the workplace and supports off-the-job training. Although open to adults, the programme mainly seeks to attract young people as a viable alternative to full-time education. At October 2013, 5,773 under 25s were participating, compared with 5,520 in 2010.

In response to industry demand, in 2012 I introduced the ICT Public/Private Apprenticeship Scheme, which recruits and trains individuals for ICT positions, in both software development and infrastructure roles, in the public and private sector. To date, 74 people have been recruited, the majority of whom are under 25. A further pilot scheme is currently being considered in the North West.

‘Training for Success’ provides young people with relevant qualifications and the interpersonal and behavioural skills to get a job. Between 2008 and 2012, occupancy for this programme grew by 59%.

In 2012, I introduced the Youth Employment Scheme, which gives unemployed young people the opportunity to gain skills in the workplace. Since the launch, over 3,200 young people have participated, with over 2,000 currently on the programme.

By March 2015, the Department will offer 12,600 opportunities to unemployed 18-24 year olds. The ‘Pathways to Success’ strategy includes initiatives specifically aimed at young people who are not in education, training or employment (NEETs), by helping them overcome employability barriers and enhance their prospects.

I am also developing a United Youth Programme, on behalf of the Executive, which will provide well integrated, flexible, high quality opportunities for young people to learn new skills and take on new challenges. These programmes, along with other education and training delivered through the further education colleges and higher education institutions ensure that our young people have more opportunities than ever before to develop new skills that will improve their employability prospects.

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Inclusion and Provision for People with a Disability

Mr McMullan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he would consider allowing tutors from Further Education Colleges to attend day care facilities to teach young people with a learning disability who cannot attend their local college.

(AQW 32625/11-15)

Dr Farry: My Department already facilitates the teaching of students with learning disabilities in day centres. Funding provided to the further education (FE) sector provides for this type of external provision. Currently, lecturing staff in all FE colleges are involved in the delivery of course provision to people with a learning disability of all ages (including young people) in a range of day care facilities throughout Northern Ireland.

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Family Law

Mr P Ramsey asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel for his assessment of the comments made by Mr Justice Coleridge in relation to family law that a ‘three strikes rule’ should be enacted in relation to custody rights for parents.

(AQW 32736/11-15)

Mr Hamilton: I am assuming that this is a reference to comments which Mr Justice Coleridge is reported to have made in respect of child contact at an annual conference of the Association of Lawyers for Children. Essentially, it was suggested that there should be a “three strikes and you’re out” approach, which would result in a transfer of care to the father if the mother persistently defies a court order for contact. Our law already allows a court to make a residence order in favour of either parent. However, in any decision regarding the upbringing of a child, the welfare of the child is paramount. In my view, it is entirely right to focus on the best interests of the child, rather than adopt a fixed approach or formula. However, I also recognise the hurt that is caused – to both parent and child - when contact is unreasonably refused. My Department will shortly be seeking views on the issue of child contact and, during the consultation exercise, my officials will be exploring what remedies could be made available when a contact order is disregarded.

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New Build for Castle Tower Special School

Mr Swann asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what level of support his Department will provide for the installation of a hydro-therapy pool in the new build for Castle Tower Special School, Ballymena.

(AQW 32657/11-15)

Mr Poots: The Northern HSC Trust Physiotherapy Department has provided information on the number of children in the Ballymena area that benefit from hydrotherapy and the number of physiotherapy hours attached to that. The Trust has also carried out a service user survey and provided data in relation to the benefits of hydrotherapy as perceived by parents and teaching staff and submitted that information to the head teacher of Castle Tower campus. The Trust will continue to provide physiotherapy support.

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Ban on Smoking in Cars

Mr Wells asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what progress has been made in drafting legislation to ban smoking in cars carrying children.

(AQW 32926/11-15)

Mr Poots: My Department has been engaged in a substantial programme of legislative change with regards to tobacco control, including measures around the introduction of standardised packaging, as well as the progression of the Tobacco Retailers Act (Northern Ireland) 2014 through the Assembly. These issues are still current, with work ongoing to commence provisions of the Tobacco Retailers Act, and a further consultation planned on draft regulations for standardised packaging.

I also have plans to introduce legislation later this year aimed at restricting the age of sale for electronic cigarettes to persons under the age of 18.

Given the extent of the current legislative programme, my intention is to focus on these issues at present. In the meantime, I will monitor developments on smoking restrictions in private vehicles in other parts of the UK, as they may have an impact on my plans for similar legislation in Northern Ireland in the future.

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Youth Employment Scheme

Mr Campbell asked the Minister for Employment and Learning, since the inception of the Youth Employment Scheme, to detail the total number of young people that have participated in the scheme; and how this compares with any target set at the outset. (AQW 32669/11-15)

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): When the Youth Employment Scheme launched in July 2012 the Department set a target to secure 12,600 opportunities by 30 March 2015. These would be offered across a range of work experience, skills development placements and subsidized employment.

To ensure the overall target is met by March 2015 and that sufficient placements are made available, the Department's Employment Service has undertaken a number of actions as follows:

- increased the capacity of its Employer Engagement Team to engage with employers province wide to promote the Scheme;
- allocated placement targets for each Jobs and Benefits office/JobCentre;
- following a Post Implementation Review engaged Contracted Providers to work alongside frontline staff to deliver Skills Development and Work Experience placements from October 2013;
- the Youth Employment Scheme formed part of the recent Skills to Succeed media campaign, to encourage both young people and employers to participate. Advertisements ran on TV and Radio in February. The campaign also included extensive web advertising, as well as outdoor advertisements in most major towns.

The latest information available shows that at 28 February 2014 the Department had secured 7143 placements representing 115% of the scheme target at that point and 57% of the overall target.

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Academic Underachievement

Mr Swann asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what steps his Department is taking to tackle underachievement among Protestant working class boys.

(AQW 32861/11-15)

Dr Farry: The key to addressing educational underachievement is to engage fully with young people while at school in order to raise their academic attainment levels. Although this is primarily a matter for the Department of Education and the school sector, my Department works in close partnership with others to try to address underachievement with an extensive range of initiatives.

All provision is open to all irrespective of religion. Addressing underachievement starts with the Careers Service. Advisers work with young people age 16 and 17 who do not move into employment or continue education or training or who drop out to assess their specific needs and signpost them to appropriate provision. This can include provision funded through Pathways to Success for those who are not in education, employment or training.

Programmes to test new approaches to address the general and employability barriers faced by such young people are funded through the Collaboration and Innovation fund. In addition the Community Family Support Programme supports families with a high level of need to develop their capacity to reach their full potential by addressing the health, social, economic, educational, employment and training issues that impact on their daily lives.

For those young people aged 16-17 school leavers who are unemployed and who aspire to work, my department offers a guarantee of training place through its Training for Success programme. The majority of young people on this programme have no or poor qualifications on leaving school. The programme is designed to enable participants to develop occupational and employability skills as well as address weaknesses in the essential skills of literacy and numeracy and, information and communication technology (ICT).

Since the start of the Strategy, over 70% of the participants are between 16 and 25 years of age and 30% are from the most deprived quartile of 5 super output areas and 43% are Protestant. In addition, further education colleges offer a wide and varied range of courses through their main campuses and network of community outreach centres.

The Learner Access and Engagement programme enables colleges to contract with third party organisations, including community organisations, to provide personal support to learners who hold few or no qualifications or who are economically inactive and disengaged from the labour market to encourage them to enrol and to complete further education courses.

A key plank to address underachievement is the Essential Skills Strategy for literacy, numeracy and, information and ICT. I am very keen that the provision offered across all programmes enables all young people to achieve to their maximum potential, to make informed choices and provides clear progression pathways into apprenticeships, further education or into sustained employment.

Consequently, I have commissioned a fundamental review of youth training to ensure that these objectives are met. The work, so far, has drawn from evidence of best practice across the developed world, and taken the views of experts in vocational education and training, both through an Expert Panel and through engagement with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. The emerging findings are that any offer at this level should include broad-based and robust vocational qualifications that enable progression to learning at a higher level, qualifications to help develop the essential skills of numeracy and literacy, the development of enterprise and employability skills and a well structured work placement that is linked to the young person's career aspirations.

Ensuring a high quality vocational training offer for young people at level 2, is a key step to ensure the future skill levels of the workforce in Northern Ireland. It is also of particular importance for groups of young people, such as Protestant working class boys, where high numbers leave school without the qualifications necessary to engage with the labour market. In addition to the emerging key elements of the offer, these young people will also need independent advice and guidance before they begin training to ensure they are signposted to provision that is appropriate to their needs and aspirations.

A review of the provision for careers in conjunction with the Department of Education is also ongoing. Young people will also need to receive high quality mentoring and have opportunities to undertake work tasters in order to help them to further realise their ambitions for a future career. The review presents an opportunity to ensure that the future youth training offer is relevant to the needs of young people, employers and the wider economy, and can help young people at risk of disengagement to realise their potential

and make a successful start to their future career.

Recently, the Executive launched the strategy “Together Building a United Community” (TBUC). Significant emphasis is given to young people on the basis that early intervention can help prevent poor educational achievement; economic inactivity and social exclusion. My department agreed to assume the lead role in developing the United Youth programme. The vision is to provide well integrated, flexible, high quality, young person centred opportunities, so that they can learn new skills and take on new challenges. The design process focuses on young people as the main end beneficiaries of the United Youth Programme and results in a programme which is relevant to young people’s lives, is attractive to them and makes a difference to their lives. To inform the future development of the programme it is envisaged that a series of pilot initiatives will have commenced for up to 300 disengaged young people aged 16-24 by September 2014 with a view to a United Youth framework of provision in place by June 2015.

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Skills Strategy

Mr Lyttle asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on the Skills Strategy key aims of raising skill levels, raising productivity, increasing social inclusion by enhancing the employability of those currently excluded from the labour market and securing Northern Ireland in a global market place.

(AQW 32893/11-15)

Dr Farry: The Skills Strategy for Northern Ireland, known as ‘Success through Skills – Transforming Futures’, was published in May 2011 and articulates the overarching vision for the development of skills in Northern Ireland. Its aim is to enable people to access and progress up the skills ladder, in order to:

- raise the skills levels of the whole workforce;
- raise productivity;
- increase levels of social inclusion by enhancing the employability of those currently excluded from the labour market; and secure Northern Ireland’s future in a global marketplace.

Since publication of our Skills Strategy the Department has made progress against its key strategic goals and its Programme for Government commitment to deliver over 200,000 qualifications, with the evidence showing that 151,000 qualifications (at level 2 and above) have been delivered over the period 2011/12 to 2012/13. Over the period 2010/11 to 2012/13 the Department has delivered over 217,000 qualifications.

My Department's Employment Service offers a range of services and programmes to help clients find and retain employment and to enhance the employability of those currently excluded from the labour market. One example is our 'Youth Employment Scheme', which I launched in July 2012. The programme has been responsible for assisting over 1,500 young people participate in work experience, 1,425 individuals have availed of skills development opportunities and 1,065 young people have moved into subsidised employment.

Our 'Pathways to Success Strategy', which was endorsed by the Northern Ireland Executive in May 2012, has been instrumental in addressing the needs of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). The biggest single intervention is the Collaboration and Innovation Fund, which is a £9.2 million fund that has been made available to 24 organisations from the community, voluntary and educational sectors to address employability barriers facing over 6,000 NEET young people from December 2012 to March 2015. To date over 2,500 young people have engaged in innovative projects and 31% of those that completed their activity have progressed into training, 18% into education and 14% into employment.

The DETI Minister and I have recently launched 'Enabling to Success', a new joint Executive draft strategic framework to tackle economic inactivity in Northern Ireland. The strategy is currently subject to a 12 week public consultation and is seeking to reduce economic inactivity through skills, incentives and job creation. Subject to agreement by the Northern Ireland Executive, a final strategy will be published in 2014/15.

The Department, through the Disability Employment Service, delivers programmes and services aimed at helping and supporting people with health conditions and disabilities to consider their options for returning to work. Over the last year, over 2,000 disabled people have been offered assistance and been able to move into or remain in work through this provision.

My Department is also currently developing a 'United Youth Programme' which will provide opportunities for our young people to learn new skills and to participate in work placements and training opportunities. The Programme will also assist young people develop their personal skills so they can play their part in developing community relations. I anticipate launching a series of pilot initiatives in the latter half of 2014.

Another key element of our Skills Strategy is the need to increase our leadership and management skills as these are deemed essential to improving business performance and the competitiveness of the Northern Ireland economy. Since publication of our Skills Strategy, over 2,100 individual managers have been trained through our Management and Leadership Development programme; 260 graduates have participated in our INTRO programme; and more than 2,100 managers have participated in our Management Analysis and Planning programme.

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