NICCY Summary: Written Assembly Questions week ending 10 April, 2015

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Department of Education

Department Savings 2015/16
Mr Samuel Gardiner MBE (UUP – Upper Bann) - To ask the Minister of Education to detail (i) each area of current expenditure that his Department will be making savings in 2015/16; (ii) the estimated level of savings for each; and (iii) what impact this will have on service delivery.

Mr J O’Dowd (Minister of Education): Details of the information you have requested are contained within my 2015-16 Savings Delivery Plan which has published on my Department’s website at www.deni.gov.uk and can be found via the link below: http://www.deni.gov.uk/microsoft_word_-_final_budget_2015-16_savings_delivery_plan.pdf

(9th April)

Sure Start Provision
Mr Barry McElduff (Sinn Féin – West Tyrone) – To ask the Minister of Education whether he will consider proposing the establishment an inter-departmental Executive sub-group or explore the feasibility of expanding Sure Start provision for all first time parents and children of pre-school age or universal access to Sure Start services for all parents and children of pre-school age.

Mr J O’Dowd (Minister of Education): The focus of Sure Start is currently within at least the top 20% most disadvantaged wards in the north of Ireland, with expansion to the top 25% most disadvantaged wards underway. The budget for the programme in 2015/16 is £24.675m.

The Independent Review of the Sure Start Programme has recently concluded. When I have had the opportunity to consider the report findings in detail, taking account of wider Government and Departmental priorities, I will consider how to respond to ensure that Sure Start services are delivered as effectively and efficiently as possible.
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 development outcomes for children and families in the most disadvantaged areas. (9th April)

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**Early Years Funding Cut**

Ms Claire Sugden (IND – East Londonderry) - To ask the Minister of Education to outline the correct staff-to-child ratio for children up to 12 years of age; and how the Early Years funding cut is likely to impact upon adequate staff cover within funded projects.

Mr J O’Dowd (Minister of Education): All settings which provide care for children under the age of 12 (including groups which offer Pre-School Education Programme places) are required to register with the Health and Social Care Trusts under the Children (NI) Order 1995. DHSSPS officials have confirmed that the staff-to-child ratios for settings working with children under the age of 12 are outlined in Volume two of the guidance to the Order and are:

- 0 to 2 years = 1:3
- 2 to 3 years = 1:4
- 3 to 12 = 1:8

Regardless of group size, at least 2 members of staff should be on duty at all times. It is therefore a matter for each group, under the terms of their registration certificate, issued by the Health and Social Care Trusts, to ensure that the specified ratios are adhered to.

The Early Years Fund is administered by Early Years – the Organisation for Young Children (EYO) on DE’s behalf under annual Service Level Agreement. Awards may be made towards a contribution towards the salary costs of the group or to meet a deficit between income and predicted expenditure.

The Executive’s Budget has been reduced by the Westminster Government by £1.5bn over the last five years. As a direct result of this reduction there is significantly reduced money to spend on frontline services such as Education. I have taken every action possible to protect Education funding and those frontline services within the Department of Education’s (DE) remit. However, it is simply impossible to protect everything, hence my
decision to reduce the funding for the Early Years Fund.

I have endeavoured to minimise the impact to the Early Years Fund as far as possible by ensuring that Early Years Fund funding is available to enable all current recipients to receive continued funding until 31st August 2015.

I will continue to review my budget to establish if a fund can continue beyond 31 August 2015. However any such fund will have to be open to all applicants, not just current recipients, and reflect the policy priorities of the Department of Education.

(9th April)

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Early Years and Sure Start Budgets for 2015/16
Mr Chris Lyttle (APNI – East Belfast) - To ask the Minister of Education whether he will reconsider his decision to cut the Early Years and Sure Start budgets for 2015/16.

Mr J O'Dowd (Minister of Education): The Westminster Government has cut the Executive’s budget by £1.5bn over this last five years. As a direct result of these cuts it has proven impossible to deliver the same level of services as before. Hence, this has been the most difficult budget I have had to prepare and unavoidably, funding to some worthy programmes will be affected.

The Early Years Fund was originally established in 2004 to help sustain certain early childhood services in areas of greatest need which were facing funding difficulties when Peace II funding ended. It has effectively remained as a “closed” Fund since then to only those groups. The Fund is administered by Early Years, the Organisation for Young Children (EYO).

I have ensured that budget is available in 2015/16 to enable all recipient groups to receive continued funding to the end of the current academic year i.e. 31 August 2015. I will continue to review my budget to establish if a fund can continue beyond that date. However any such fund will have to be open to all applicants, not just current recipients, and reflect the policy priorities of DE.
I have protected the Sure Start budget as far as possible so that the original reduction of £2m has been reduced to £1m. The reduction of £1m leaves a Sure Start budget of £24.7m for 2015/16. It is anticipated that the reduction will be realised as far as possible from areas within service delivery where greater efficiencies can be realised, with the aim of protecting front line services. (9th April)

Cost of Translation Services
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson (UUP – Upper Bann) - To ask the Minister of Education detail the cost of providing translation services in (i) primary; and (ii) post primary schools in each of the last three years, broken down by Education and Library Board.

Mr J O’Dowd (Minister of Education): The cost of providing translation services in (i) primary; and (ii) post primary schools in each of the last three financial years, broken down by Education and Library Board (ELB) is:

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*Certain translation services are provided centrally by the NEELB.

(9th April)

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**Primary Languages Programme**

*Mr Patsy McGlone (SDLP – Mid Ulster)* - To ask the Minister of Education, in relation to the ending of the Primary Languages Programme, what (i) consultation was carried out and the time period for this consultation; and (ii) impact assessment was carried out on the ending of the programme.

*Mr J O'Dowd (Minister of Education)*: A consultation was carried out on all budget proposals outlined in the Draft Budget 2015/16. This included a proposed reduction in the budget of the Primary Modern Languages Programme (PMLP). The consultation was launched on 26 November 2014 and closed on 29 December 2014. The decision to reduce and subsequently to cease funding of the PMLP was subject to equality screening and published on the DE website.

The Westminster Government has cut the Executive’s budget by £1.5bn over this last 5 years. As a direct result of these cuts, it has proven impossible to deliver the same level of services as before.

It is highly regrettable that the PMLP has come to an end but is a consequence of seeking to protect frontline services and the Aggregated Schools Budget. (9th April)

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Special Educational Needs Coordinators
Mr Danny Kinahan (UUP – South Antrim) - To ask the Minister of Education how many schools do not have fully trained Special Educational Needs Coordinators amongst their teachers, broken down by (a) sector; and (b) Education and Library Board.

Mr J O’Dowd (Minister of Education): The Education Authority has advised that it does hold the detail in relation to training undertaken by Special Educational Needs Coordinators (SENCo’s). Schools should ensure that appropriate arrangements are in place for the in-service training and professional development of staff (where appropriate, including non-teaching staff) to help them work effectively with pupils with special educational needs. Such arrangements might appropriately be included in the schools development plan. Schools and Boards should consider the particular training needs of SEN co-ordinators. (9th April)
Department of Health

Paediatric Tonsillectomy Surgery
Mr Daithí McKay (Sinn Féin – North Antrim) - To ask the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the number of cases where paediatric tonsillectomy surgery patients have had their surgery cancelled on more than one occasion within the last twelve months in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.

Mr J Wells (Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Within the last twelve months, there has been one instance where a paediatric tonsillectomy surgery patient has had their surgery cancelled on more than one occasion in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust.  

(9th April)

Child Immunisation Programme
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson (UUP – Upper Bann) - To ask the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how he will fund the introduction of the Meningitis B Vaccine Bexsero as part of the Child Immunisation Programme, once negotiations have been completed.

Mr J Wells (Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I welcome the outcome of the negotiations to secure an effective, safe and cost-effective vaccine to protect against Men B. All four UK Health Ministers had previously accepted the JCVI recommendation to introduce a Men B vaccination programme, subject to the vaccine being procured at a cost effective price.

I have agreed that Northern Ireland should be included in the DH-led procurement process to secure adequate supplies of the Men B vaccine and I will ensure sufficient funds are allocated from the health budget to enable this programme to be introduced as quickly as practicable.  

(9th April)