

NICCY Summary: Written Assembly Questions week ending 27 January 2017

Equality screening of Bedroom Tax

<p>AQW 9340/16- 21</p>	<p>Ms Nichola Mallon (SDLP - North Belfast)</p>	<p>To ask the Minister for Communities in relation to the Social Sector Size Criteria known as the Bedroom Tax (i) in light of the previous equality screening exercise unduly restricting itself to the period of mitigation his Department will now equality screen the policy to assess the potential equality impacts of any actual implementation of Bedroom Tax; and (ii) in light of a formal review of the original equality Screening Decision being triggered by consultees whether all further screening decisions will not repeat the omission of due consideration of four of the nine Section 75 categories, religious belief, political opinion, racial group and sexual orientation.</p> <p>The Department for Social Development conducted an Equality Impact Assessment examining the implications of the introduction of Welfare Reform in Northern Ireland, including the introduction of Social Sector Size Criteria. The findings were published in April 2012 https://www.communities-ni.gov.uk/publications/welfare-changes-equality-impact-assessments</p> <p>The Department for Work and Pensions carried out an Equality Impact Assessment on the introduction of the Social Sector Size Criteria in Great Britain, these findings were published in June 2012 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/social-sector-housing-under-occupation-equality-impact-assessment</p> <p>In relation to the screenings carried out on the Social Sector Size Criteria and Mitigation, the Department for Communities completed and published an equality screening exercise in July 2016, revised the original screening and published it in December</p>
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2016 and again in January 2017. Legislation to give effect to the mitigation scheme was passed by the NI Assembly on 16 January 2017.

Social Sector Size Criteria and Mitigation July 2016

Social Sector Size Criteria and Mitigation December 2016

Social Sector Size Criteria Mitigation January 2017

The data employed to complete the equality screening was drawn from the housing benefit system and property records held by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) and the Housing Associations. These are the main tools available to NIHE for analysing Housing Benefit.

Provision of a further breakdown by Section 75 category is not possible at present. Data relating to Religious Belief, Political Opinion, Racial Group and Sexual Orientation is not currently collected as it has no bearing on eligibility for Housing Benefit and as such this information is not stored within administrative systems. However, for the iteration of the screening templates, available information from other sources has been used.

In addition, officials in the Department for Communities have developed a Welfare Reform Evaluation Strategy which will be instrumental in the continuing scrutiny and assessment of the impact of Welfare Reform and associated mitigation measures, including the Social Sector Size Criteria.

All research commissioned as part of the evaluation of Welfare Reform will see Equality Information collected as a matter of course, and the Department intends to collect Section 75 data for those availing of the mitigation schemes.

The strategy has been shared with the Committee for the Department for Communities.

		<p>The NI Executive has committed to reviewing the mitigation schemes in 2018/19 and a Section 75 rescreening exercise may be carried out at that time.</p>
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Mitigation measures to protect tenants from the bedroom tax

<p>AOW 9339/16 -21</p>	<p>Ms Nichol a Mallon (SDLP - North Belfast)</p>	<p>To ask the Minister for Communities to outline the mitigation measures he will put in place to fully protect tenants from the bedroom tax ahead of its introduction on 20 February. <i>[Priority Written]</i></p> <p>The Department for Communities has been preparing systems and processes which would ensure that no Housing Benefit claimant in Northern Ireland would suffer a negative financial impact as a result of the Social Sector Size Criteria.</p> <p>The Department also prepared the necessary draft legislation to implement the statutory mitigation scheme. Assembly approval was required in order to give the Department the necessary statutory powers to make payments to support approximately 34,000 Housing benefit claimants who will be impacted by the introduction of the Social Sector Size Criteria. Urgent Measures have been taken to ensure that the Department has the legal powers to mitigate the impact of the Social Sector Size Criteria and ensure that no claimant suffers any negative financial consequences. The necessary legislation was approved by the Assembly on Monday 16 January.</p> <p>This legislation sets out in detail all the measures my Department will be taking.</p> <p>Signed:</p> <hr/> <p>Paul Givan MLA</p> <p>Date:</p> <hr/> <p>—</p>
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BACKGROUND NOTE TO ASSEMBLY QUESTION AQW 9339/16-21

Nichola Mallon is a Social Democratic and Labour Party MLA for North Belfast constituency.

Ms Mallon has asked one previous question on the bedroom tax under Priority AQW 9262/16-21.

In the Fresh Start Agreement Her Majesty's Government and the Northern Ireland Executive agreed an approach for the implementation of Welfare Reform in Northern Ireland, including the implementation of the Social Sector Size Criteria.

In the Fresh Start Agreement, the Executive reaffirmed its commitment that the Social Sector Size Criteria would not apply in Northern Ireland. The Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group, chaired by Professor Eileen Evason was established and tasked to make recommendations on how the impact of Welfare Reform could be mitigated within a defined financial envelope.

The Welfare Reform Mitigations Working Group Report welcomed the Executive's decision to provide full mitigation for the Social Sector Size Criteria until 31st March 2020. The Executive has set aside £91m to mitigate the impact of the Social Sector Size Criteria over the life of the Fresh Start Agreement. **Table 1** shows the annual estimated costs of mitigating the Social Sector Size Criteria.

Table 1: Funding Requirement

Year	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	Total
£million	15m*	24m	26m	26m	91m

*Based on part year

Under the Social Sector Size Criteria an under occupancy restriction will be introduced for current and future working age Housing Benefit

Claimants, based on the number of people in a household and the size of the accommodation occupied. This means Housing Benefit is reduced for tenants occupying a larger property than their household size warrants.

Those assessed as under-occupying under the Social Sector Size Criteria will see a reduction in their Housing Benefit component calculated by a reduction of:

14% of the total eligible rent for under-occupation by one bedroom;
25% of the total eligible rent for under-occupation by two or more bedrooms.

Data provided by the Northern Ireland Housing Executive (NIHE) concluded that as at May 2015 an estimated 33,916 households in the social rented sector were under-occupying. Approximately 24% of these households are under-occupying by two or more bedrooms. It is estimated that Northern Ireland households could see their Housing Benefit reduced on average by:

NIHE Tenants: Between £8.25 (one bedroom) and £14.60 (two or more bedrooms) per week;

Housing Association Tenants: Between £11.44 (one bedroom) and £20.42 (two or more bedrooms) per week.

The Social Sector Size Criteria will come into force in Northern Ireland on the 20th February 2017. The Department intended to implement the mitigation scheme simultaneously with the introduction of the Social Sector Size Criteria to ensure that no household would be negatively impacted or have to move house as a result of the changes of how housing benefit is calculated.

The Welfare Reform and Work (Northern Ireland) Order 2016, brought through Westminster by DWP in September 2016, amends the Welfare Reform (Northern Ireland) Order 2015 to provide the Department with the power to introduce a mitigation scheme. The mitigation regulations were passed by the Assembly on 16 January

		<p>2017.</p> <p>The mitigation scheme is part of the Welfare Reform Mitigations Programme .</p> <p>The mitigation regulations were draft affirmative and therefore subject to debate in the Assembly. Failure to lay legislation within a short timeframe to the introduction of the Social Sector Size Criteria on 20 February 2017 would have meant that those claimants impacted would be unable to avail of mitigation.</p> <p>Reply prepared by: TOMMY O'REILLY 75036</p>
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Support the DfC provides for foodbanks

<p><u>AQW</u> <u>9264/16-</u> <u>21</u></p>	<p>Ms Nichola Mallon (<i>SDLP</i> - <i>North</i> <i>Belfast</i>)</p>	<p>To ask the Minister for Communities to outline the support his Department provides to food banks.</p> <p>My Department recognises that food banks provide a service to individuals in times of real crisis in their lives. In that context, my staff on the ground have been pro active in working with the food bank network to ensure that those accessing food support are also assisted in drawing down the social security benefits and wider supports that they are entitled to.</p> <p>My officials have put in place a partnership model whereby Food Banks can ensure that every individual and family that finds itself in crisis and presenting in need of food support is referred directly into the Department's Improving Benefit Uptake Service for a full and confidential benefit entitlement check. This assesses entitlement, not only to Social Security Benefits, but also to a wide range of additional government benefits, services and support.</p> <p>In addition, Food Banks have been offered a second layer of support - a named Community Outreach Officer, who will work</p>
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closely with their staff and volunteers to ensure that anyone who needs further benefit advice or help with making a claim is given the support they need. If necessary, this support can be provided within their own homes. Community Outreach Officers' contact details are shared to ease access to advice.

A wide range of food banks in Northern Ireland have been provided with "Make the Call" promotional material and are actively encouraged to distribute these with every food box or parcel. It is hoped that by doing so, those presenting at food banks will be encouraged to have an entitlement check by telephoning the dedicated "Make the Call" freephone Benefits Advice Line (0800 232 1271).

Food bank personnel and users were directly involved in primary research carried out by the Department into the reasons why people use food banks, the lessons learned from this has informed our ongoing service improvement and partnership working. The Report, 'An Insight into Food Banks in Northern Ireland', is available on the Department's website.

More recently, as part of "A Fresh Start", additional Executive funds were agreed to help mitigate the impact of Welfare Reform, with £1.65million allocated to research and pilot actions aimed at reducing food poverty by improving access to food through a network of community food shops and social stores/supermarkets over the next four years.

Given the high level of interest and ongoing activity by a wide range of stakeholders in this area, I have commissioned a scoping study to identify the opportunities for that money to add value by bringing forward proposals for testing interventions that can be sustained and will make a difference in reducing food poverty.

		On an ongoing basis, my officials continue to engage with a wide range of food bank representatives to better understand people's need and to join up services and support in a way that helps reduce the need for food banks in our society.
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Target for participants in shared education

AQO 956/16- 21	Ms Kellie Armstrong (APNI - Strangford)	<p>To ask the Minister of Education, given that the target for participants in shared education is cited as 762 schools in the Delivering Social Change Signature Project: Shared Education business case, to clarify his statement during a Radio Ulster interview on 3 October 2016 that the target in the business case was 352 schools.</p> <p>The target for the DSC Shared Education Signature Project is to increase the percentage of schools providing shared classes to 33% by end of 2017/18. At the time the target was set there were 1,068 schools (primary, post-primary and special) – hence a target of 352 schools. Statistics for 2016/17 show the number of schools has declined to 1,061 – hence the current target is 350 schools. The reference to 762 schools relates to the number potentially eligible to participate in the programme.</p>
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Delay in presentation of Childcare Strategy to the Executive

<u>AQO 955/16- 21</u>	Mrs Jenny Palmer (UUP - Lagan Valley)	<p>To ask the Minister of Education to outline the reason for the delay in the presentation of the Childcare Strategy to the Executive.</p> <p>The Childcare Strategy is being delivered on a phased basis. The first phase was published in 2013 and contained a number of Key First Actions to address childcare needs which had been identified through consultation and research as priority issues. These Actions are continuing to be implemented and included the establishment of the Bright Start School Age Childcare Grant Scheme, which</p>
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		<p>financially supports low cost childcare places and has, to date, supported some 3,000 low cost childcare places across Northern Ireland.</p> <p>A draft Childcare Strategy was launched for consultation in the latter half of 2015 by the former Office of the First Minister and Deputy First Minister. Some 300 consultation responses were received in addition to the views expressed during the formal consultation and stakeholder events.</p> <p>This is indicative of the extent of public interest in this policy area and I want to ensure that the revised version of the Strategy fully reflects the outcome of the consultation and the existing research and evidence which highlights the importance of high quality childcare in promoting positive early childhood development. The transfer of policy responsibility for childcare to my Department in May 2016 has also created opportunities to ensure that childcare is better aligned with DE Early Years initiatives. I want to ensure that I have fully considered the opportunities for integrating these services in line with the Strategy's objectives.</p> <p>The Strategy is at an advanced stage of development.</p>
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Publication of Independent Review of Integrated Education

<p>AQO 953/16-21</p>	<p>Ms Clare Bailey (GPNI - South Belfast)</p>	<p>To ask the Minister of Education when he will publish the Independent Review of Integrated Education.</p> <p>I am currently considering the review report. No final decision has been made on the date of publication.</p>
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Publication of the Independent Review of Integrated Education report

<p><u>AQW</u> <u>9519/16-</u> <u>21</u></p>	<p>Mr Chris Lyttle (APNI - East Belfast)</p>	<p>To ask the Minister of Education to outline (i) the reason for the delay in the publication of the Independent Review of Integrated Education report; and (ii) when it will be published.</p> <p>The review report will be published on 2 March 2016. Protocol indicates that major consultations should not take place during the election period.</p>
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Introduction of high visibility clothing as part of school uniforms

<p>AQW 9630/16- 21</p>	<p>Mr Mark Durkan (SDLP - Foyle)</p>	<p>To ask the Minister of Education whether he has plans to instruct the Education Authority to introduce high visibility clothing as a mandatory part of school uniforms.</p> <p>The wearing of a school uniform is not governed by legislation and any decisions on the choice of school uniform are a matter for the Board of Governors of individual schools. My Department has, however, issued guidance to schools on school uniform policy which includes a section relating to travelling to school. It emphasises that the safety of children is paramount and highlights the difficulties caused by dark uniforms during the winter months, particularly on rural roads. It asks schools to take this into account when designing their uniform and consider using reflective materials and encourage the wearing of high visibility items.</p>
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Expansion of free school meals programmes

<p>AQW 9454/16- 21</p>	<p>Mr Steven Agnew (GPNI - North Down)</p>	<p>To ask the Minister of Education to outline what plans he has to expand the free school meals programme.</p> <p>I have no current plans to expand the free school meals programme.</p>
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Update on timescale for Fresh Start Agreement for Shared and Integrated Education

<p>AQW 9440/16- 21</p>	<p>Ms Paula Bradshaw (APNI - South Belfast)</p>	<p>To ask the Minister of Education for an update on the timescale on the Fresh Start Agreement for Shared and Integrated Education.</p> <p>The Fresh Start Agreement includes provision of up to £500 million over ten years (2016-2026) of new capital funding to support shared and integrated education. To date 23 projects have been selected. The majority of the projects are in the early stages of planning with procurement currently ongoing to appoint integrated consultant teams. A significant number of the projects will also require land acquisition which can involve lengthy lead-in times.</p>
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Statutory requirements by schools to provide SEN therapies

<p>AQW 9319/16- 21</p>	<p>Mr Chris Lyttle (APNI - East Belfast)</p>	<p>To ask the Minister of Education (i) whether schools are statutorily required to provide additional therapies to pupils such as physiotherapy and occupational therapy when detailed in a statement of Special Educational Needs; and (ii) if so, to detail within what timescale they are required to put these in place.</p> <p>Statutory responsibility for arranging therapeutic services, when this forms part of special educational provision in a child's statement of special educational needs (SEN), falls to the Education Authority (EA) under Article 16(5)(a)(ii) of the Education</p>
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		<p>(Northern Ireland) Order 1996.</p> <p>However, prime responsibility for the provision to children of therapeutic services rests with the Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs), as the employer of therapists. This applies generally and also to any specification of such services in a statement of SEN.</p> <p>Timescales for putting therapeutic services in place would be a matter for the HSCTs, as agreed with the EA.</p>
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