

## **NICCY Summary: NI Assembly Written Answers for Week Ending 28th February 2014**

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## **Social Mobility**

Mr Agnew asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister to detail how their Department measures social mobility and to provide the indicators of social mobility, for each of the last five years.

(AQW 29504/11-15)

**Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness:** The Executive's anti-poverty and social inclusion strategy, Lifetime Opportunities, adopted a 'lifecycle' approach to tackling poverty and social exclusion, recognising that in order to prevent a cycle of deprivation persisting through generations, issues affecting early years, children and young people are crucial.

The Lifetime Opportunities Monitoring Framework Update Report 1998/99 - 2010-11, published by our department in August 2013, presents a range of statistical targets and indicators endorsed by the Northern Ireland Executive Sub-Committee on Poverty and Social Inclusion in support of Lifetime Opportunities. The report reflects many of the commonly agreed EU and UK indicators, but also includes a number of additional indicators specific to here. A further update is anticipated in 2014.

Delivering Social Change has adopted and extended the lifecycle approach to tackling poverty and social exclusion, aiming to break the cycle of multi-generational problems by improving children and young people's health, well-being and life opportunities and reducing poverty and associated issues across all ages. However, we do not specifically measure social mobility.

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## Attendance Rates of Looked After Children

Mr Storey asked the Minister of Education, pursuant to AQW 30290/11-15, to explain the reasons for the differences between the attendance rates of looked after children and other pupils between the primary and post-primary sectors; and what action his Department is undertaking to address this issue.

(AQW 31002/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** There is no single or definitive reason as to why there are differences between the attendance rates of looked after children and other pupils between the primary and post-primary sectors. In 2011 my Department commissioned a Study into how the education system can improve the attendance of looked after children at post-primary school. The study, conducted by PricewaterhouseCoopers, identified a number of underlying causes and influences that impact on the non-attendance of looked after children, including:

- Peer pressure;
- Behavioural issues;
- Underlying social and personal issues;
- Personal factors;
- Contact with birth parents;
- Socio-economic circumstances;
- Age when a child enters the care system;
- Placement type and stability; and
- Attitudes to education in the home/care environment.

Schools should refer pupils to the Education Welfare Service (EWS) for support, if appropriate, if their attendance falls below 85% or if there is a cause for concern. Intervention by the EWS is tailored to the individual child following the assessment of their circumstances including their needs, the parents/carer's capacity to meet those needs and the family and environmental factors. Provision of advice and support, consideration of warnings or any onward referral is completely determined by the outcome of this assessment.

A number of initiatives are also aimed at improving the attendance of looked after children. For example:

- The North Eastern Education and Library Board, through the Residential Study Support Project have been facilitating homework and study support in residential units in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust area during the evenings. A particular focus to this work over recent years is to undertake capacity building for residential social workers in relation to their corporate parenting responsibilities in respect of looked after children education.
- The Attachment Project (TAP) is a pilot project within the Belfast and South Eastern Education and Library Boards which focuses on building capacity and awareness in schools on understanding and managing attachment issues for looked after children. This project will be evaluated through Queen's University of Belfast in the coming months and it is hoped to extend its reach in the coming academic year. This project also has the benefit of enabling teachers to utilize.

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### **Future Provision of Post-Primary Education**

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Education how he will adjust his policy approach to take into account the decision of the Southern Education and Library Board to abandon the consideration of Option A on the future provision of post-primary education.

(AQW 31055/11-15)

**Mr O'Dowd:** I am aware that the Southern Education and Library Board (SELB), at its meeting on 12 February 2014, decided to stop the consultation on the Board's preferred option in respect of 'Updating the Dickson Plan: the SELB proposals', and to move forward with a more wide ranging consultation process. I am concerned that despite recognition for several years that all pupils in the controlled sector in the Craigavon area do not have access to equitable educational provision and despite the SELB pronouncement in June 2013 that retaining the status quo is not an option, the Board has failed to come forward with a strategic plan to address the fundamental inequality at the heart of this matter. I will be seeking robust assurances aligned to a timeframe as to how they intend to eradicate education inequality for the controlled sector in the Dickson plan area. The issues present in Craigavon, and in fact in many areas, highlight the need for area planning. The decision of the SELB does not give me cause to adjust the strategic approach being undertaken.

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## **Coach Operators and Private Tour Organisers: Safeguarding of Young People**

Mr Craig asked the Minister of the Environment to detail how coach operators and private tour organisers are governed with regard to the safeguarding of young people of post-primary school age in their care.

(AQW 31165/11-15)

**Mr Durkan:** There are a number of measures in place to govern the safeguarding of young people in respect of licensing conditions. Holders of bus operator licenses are required to be of good repute and, as part of the process of determining if an applicant meets this requirement, a basic disclosure certificate for every person named on the application (such as owners, partners, directors and transport managers) must be submitted in support of applications for licenses. Basic disclosure certificates, issued by AccessNI, show all unspent convictions. This information is taken into consideration when assessing an application for a licence. In addition, bus drivers, who, unlike bus operators, will be in contact with passengers, must also be judged to be fit persons to hold a licence to drive a bus and they too must submit a basic disclosure certificate that will reveal any unspent convictions recorded against them. Again, this information is considered as part of the application process. Where an applicant for an operator's or a driver's licence has been convicted of an offence, and the conviction remains unspent, the Department will assess the nature and severity of the offence before deciding whether the licence should be granted. Offences that might suggest any danger to children or any vulnerable person will be given a great deal of weight in this judgment.

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## **Welfare Reform: Implementation**

Mr Wilson asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline any communication between HM Government and the Executive on the question of sanctions, should Welfare Reform not be implemented.

(AQO 5604/11-15)

**Mr Hamilton:** The Chief Secretary to the Treasury, Danny Alexander MP, wrote in June 2013 on the penalties to be applied to the Executive's DEL budget allocation, should welfare reform not be progressed by January 2014. Mr Alexander estimated the penalties at an initial £5 million per month but indicated that these would quickly rise as welfare reforms are rolled out in Great Britain. Of course, the latest estimate suggests that by 2017-18 the costs will exceed £270 million. I also discussed the issue of welfare reform with the Chief Secretary to the Treasury at the Finance Minister's quadrilateral meeting held in November 2013. At this meeting the Chief Secretary reinforced the UK Government's intention to apply penalties from January 2014. My officials also met with their HM Treasury counterparts on 14 February 2014 to discuss welfare reform. At this meeting HM Treasury officials outlined the mechanics of adjusting the Northern Ireland Block Grant.

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## **Specialist Local Counselling Services**

Mrs Dobson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what resources his Department provides to specialist local counselling services to provide early intervention services to primary school age children who need specialist care.

(AQW 31008/11-15)

**Mr Poots:** The information requested is not available. Specialist care for children covers a wide spectrum of services including child protection, exposure to domestic abuse, child mental health, disability and life limiting conditions. Children's needs are assessed using the Understanding the Needs of Children in Northern Ireland (UNOCINI) Framework. In accordance with assessed need, a range of early intervention support services are provided, some in conjunction with colleagues in Education.

Core children's services such as Child Health, Child and Adolescent Mental Health (CAMHS), Community Paediatrics and Children with a Disability are provided across the continuum of childhood. These services include counselling, and also include areas such as behaviour management, bereavement counselling, and more specialist/ clinical interventions to assist children and their families to manage or understand specific conditions.

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### **Family Funds: Local Families**

Mr Allister asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline any disparity between Northern Ireland the rest of the UK in relation to applying successfully to the respective Family Funds; and whether local families are at a disadvantage due to lack of funding.

(AQW 31107/11-15)

**Mr Poots:** The criteria for applying to the Family Fund for support are the same across the UK. In that respect families in Northern Ireland are not disadvantaged. However, due to an increase in demand for support, I understand the Family Fund has allocated all funding provided by my Department for the current financial year and is unable to process any further applications from families in Northern Ireland. Officials met with representatives from the Family Fund recently to discuss the current funding situation. Despite the challenging financial circumstances, I am hopeful of being able to maintain my Departments contribution to the Family Fund again next year.

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### **Welfare Reform: Flexibilities**

Mr Weir asked the Minister for Social Development whether he has taken account of the issues identified by the voluntary sector and advice sector when drawing up his package of Welfare Reform flexibilities.

(AQO 5617/11-15)

**Mr McCausland:** Since coming into office in May 2011, I have been listening to the concerns about welfare reform expressed not only by the voluntary and advice sector but by Executive colleagues and a large number of individuals who have written to me on this issue. The outcome of this is that I have developed a package of measures which potentially deals with many of these concerns and which will not only help simplify the social security system but more importantly it will involve measures which protect the most vulnerable in our society. I hope this package will be seen as significantly addressing the key concerns around welfare reform and will enable Executive colleagues to agree that the Welfare Reform Bill move to Consideration Stage in the Assembly.

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