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Office of First and Deputy First Minister

Child Poverty Strategy

Mr Chris Lyttle (All – East Belfast) - To ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister whether their Department has sought advice from the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission on the child poverty strategy, as per Section 13 of the Child Poverty Act 2010.

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The Welfare Reform Act 2012 amended the Child Poverty Act 2010 to create the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission. The Welfare Reform Act repealed Section 13 (1) – (2) of the Child Poverty Act 2010 which required Northern Ireland Ministers, in preparing a strategy, to request the advice of the Child Poverty Commission and to give it due regard. **(13th October)**

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Delivering Social Change

Mr Chris Lyttle (All – East Belfast) - To ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister when a final analysis of the responses received for Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People will be published.

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: The final analysis of the responses received following a public consultation of the Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People Consultation document was published on the OFMDFM website on 29 September 2014. These can be downloaded at the link below:
Delivering Social Change for Children and Young People Strategy – summary and analysis of consultation responses (PDF 1.45MB) **(13th October)**

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Child Poverty Strategy

Mr Chris Lyttle (All – East Belfast) - To ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister when the child poverty strategy will be laid in the Assembly.

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: We are aiming to lay the Child Poverty Strategy 2014-2017 in the Assembly this Autumn. **(14th October)** [Back to Top](#)

Delivering Social Change

Mr Chris Lyttle (All – East Belfast) – To ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister why there has been a failure to reference the seventh Delivering Social Change Signature Programme; and whether they will ensure that the Play and Leisure Signature Programme is given equal standing with the other Signature Programmes.

Mr P Robinson and Mr M McGuinness: In October 2013, Junior Ministers announced a potential £1.6m investment over three years, through a seventh Delivering Social Change (DSC) signature programme, to enhance play and leisure opportunities for children and young people. It is proposed that the Signature Programme would support new sustainable opportunities for play; raise awareness of the importance of play and ensure play is considered in the provision of local services.

The Play and Leisure Signature Programme has the same status as the other Signature Programmes and progress is monitored by the DSC Programme Board which is chaired by Junior Ministers. In liaison with sectoral experts significant work is currently underway to develop the Programme. Given the pressures on Departmental budgets across the Executive consideration is being given to a range of potential actions and the most appropriate method of delivery. **(14th October)**

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Department of Education

Underdevelopment Skills of Young Children

Ms Claire Sugden (Ind – East Londonderry) - To ask the Minister of Education how his Department identifies underdeveloped social, emotional, communication and language skills of young children; and to detail the mechanisms in place to monitor progress in these areas.

Mr O’Dowd (The Minister of Education): For young children in DE funded early years settings, assessment of children’s learning is based on day-to-day observations of, and interactions with, children in a range of situations. Potential barriers to learning such as under developed social, emotional, communication or language skills are identified through careful observation, recording of responses to activities, and through close liaison with other professionals. It may be necessary to draw up individual plans to meet a child’s needs or to identify appropriate support.

I recently announced nearly £200,000 additional funding specifically to help eligible non-statutory pre-school settings to identify and address underdeveloped social, emotional, communication and language skills of young children in line with the Department’s commitment set out in ‘Learning to Learn – A Framework for Early Years Education and Learning’.

The statutory responsibility for securing provision for pupils with Special Educational Needs (SEN) rests with both schools, and the Education and Library Boards which are responsible under special education legislation for identifying, assessing and, in appropriate cases, making provision for children with SEN in their areas.

A range of tools are used to monitor progress in these areas both for young children generally and for children with SEN. **(14th October)**

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School Transport

Ms Claire Sugden (Ind – East Londonderry) - To ask the Minister of Education for his assessment of existing transport provision for school pupils in each Education and Library Board, including eligibility criteria for a free school bus pass for pupils.

Mr O’Dowd (The Minister of Education): The existing school transport policy provides assistance for eligible pupils in the form of a seat on a bus (or other vehicle), or a sessional ticket (“bus pass”), or a monetary allowance in lieu of transport. Eligibility is based on attendance at a suitable school (one in the recognised categories of Catholic Maintained, Controlled or Other Voluntary, Integrated, Irish Medium, and Denominational and Non-Denominational Grammar) and distance (two miles for Primary pupils and three miles for Post-Primary). In the context of parents’ legal duty to secure the regular attendance of their child(ren) at school, the distance criterion reflected the distance beyond which it was viewed that pupils may require assistance to facilitate their attendance. The suitable school criterion reflects parental choice in terms of the category of school they wish their child(ren) to attend.

This system presently assists almost 90,000 pupils at an annual cost of almost £75 million. However, given that the current policy has been in operation relatively unchanged for many years, I recently commissioned an Independent Review of the policy with the aim of ensuring that we are delivering the optimum service possible in all aspects of education here, so that there is equality of opportunity and access for all our young people and every child is enabled to achieve to their full potential. Transport is a key facilitator in this vision. I am, at present, taking time to consider in detail the findings of the Independent Review Panel before making decisions on the way forward, and will publish the Panel’s Report in due course. **(14th October)**

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School Transport

Ms Claire Sugden (Ind – East Londonderry) - To ask the Minister of Education what provision is in place to ensure that the needs of any pupil attending a post-primary school, who has a physical disability, is appropriately met by school transport services.

Mr O’Dowd (The Minister of Education): The Education and Library Boards have informed me that pupils with both special education needs and a physical disability will be subject to the statementing process which will determine whether a pupil has special transport needs and if so how these should be addressed and for how long. Such statements may be the subject of regular review.

Pupils with a physical disability, but without special needs, will be subject to a medical process. As with the statementing process, the medical process will determine whether a pupil has transport needs and if so how these should be addressed and for how long.

Pupils with a short-term physical disability may, on production of suitable medical evidence, be provided with transport assistance for a short period. **(14th October)**

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Educational Inequality

Ms Claire Sugden (Ind – East Londonderry) - To ask the Minister of Education for his assessment of the current relationship between educational attainment and social disadvantage, and the perceived inequality in outcomes for school age students from the most deprived areas.

Mr O’Dowd (The Minister of Education): The Department’s evidence, based on a census of all schools/pupils, confirms that social deprivation, as measured by Free School Meals, is strongly correlated with and reflective of educational disadvantage and lower educational attainment. This is very much in line with international evidence which also reports the strong correlation between pupils’ socio-economic background and their outcomes in education. Despite improving outcomes at all stages, the attainment gap between our most and least deprived pupils remains. This inequality in outcomes is a reality not a perception.

In 2013, 34.9% (one third) of school leavers entitled to free school meals (FSME) achieved 5 or more GCSEs at A*-C (or equivalent) including English and maths compared to 68.4% (two thirds) of leavers not entitled free school meals.

In 2012/13 pupil level data was received for the first time for primary school-age pupils. The figures show that 62.6% of FSME pupils achieved the expected level (Level 4) or above in Communication compared to 82.9% of non-FSME pupils and 64.1% of FSME pupils achieved the expected level (Level 4) or above in Using Mathematics compared to 84.2% of non-FSME pupils.

This lower level of achievement amongst pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds is consistent with levels of poverty, a lack of social mobility and a pattern of educational inequality. These factors impact on a child's education pathway from their earliest years. The evidence shows that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds have greater obstacles to overcome. Their schools need additional resources to help them do this. That is why I have redistributed school funding to target schools with high numbers of pupils from socially disadvantaged backgrounds and injected a further £10 million specifically targeting social deprivation into school budgets from April 2014.

I have also continued to implement policies and provide funding for a range of additional interventions, with a focus on improving standards and tackling educational underachievement. However, there are two other key issues.

- Firstly, a socially balanced education system enables all pupils to perform better. While some schools persist in the use of academic selection, we will be unable to eradicate this social division.
- Secondly, inequality in outcomes is a societal issue and one that education authorities and schools cannot tackle on their own. The challenge of tackling inequalities, be they educational, health or economic, is one that we all face and success will depend on all stakeholders working together in order to achieve greater equity in our society. **(16th October)**

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Dyslexia

Ms Claire Sugden (Ind – East Londonderry) - To ask the Minister of Education what support is available to pupils in primary and post-primary schools whose learning ability is affected by dyslexia.

Mr O’Dowd (The Minister of Education): The Education and Library Boards (ELBs) have advised that a range of special education support and provision is available to parents and schools for a child identified with dyslexia, including the following:

- dyslexia awareness training for schools (and parents) as requested by schools to enhance the capacity of teachers to identify and respond appropriately in addressing dyslexia;
- all Educational Psychologists (EPs) are trained and skilled in the assessment and identification of dyslexia. Following the identification of dyslexia EPs provide a comprehensive range of support including recommendations and resources to parents and schools to assist the pupil achieve his/her potential;
- a range of innovative strategies, resources and computer assisted programmes are available to pupils with dyslexia for whom more traditional methods are unsuccessful;
- when children who are thought to have dyslexia are put forward for assessment at Stage 3 of the Code of Practice (COP), they are either screened for additional Board support by psychology assistants or EPs. A range of cognitive and attainment tests are used in the identification of dyslexia with agreed five board criteria for additional Stage 3 and Stage 5 support applied in each case.
- some schools have achieved or are working towards achievement of Dyslexia Friendly status usually in association with the British Dyslexia Association (BDA). Schools are supported by the Board services in achieving this award;
- a range of measures to help those children and young people identified as having dyslexia under examination conditions.

In addition DE is funding the SEN Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Literacy Project which is delivered jointly by Stranmillis and St Mary’s University Colleges. This project is being funded for 3 years and will be completed at the end of March 2015. The project, which offers specialist training accredited by the British Dyslexia Association to all primary schools, enables teachers to identify children with literacy difficulties, including dyslexia, assess their individual needs and provide appropriate interventions. ELBs will continue to review their services in order to provide improved assistance to those children and young people with dyslexia. **(16th October)** [Back to Top](#)

Home Schooling

Mr Adrian McQuillan (DUP – East Londonderry) – To ask the Minister of Education how his Department regulates and oversees home schooling; and whether the Education and Training Inspectorate has an oversight role.

Mr O’Dowd (The Minister of Education): The legislation which applies to the education of pupils of compulsory school age, including pupils who are receiving elective home education, confers specific powers on both the Education and Library Boards (the Boards) and on parents.

Article 44 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 requires that the Boards have regard to the general principle that, so far as is compatible with the provision of efficient instruction and training and the avoidance of unreasonable public expenditure, pupils shall be educated in accordance with the wishes of their parents.

Article 45 (1) of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 places a duty on parents of children of compulsory school age to ensure that the education provided to their child, whether by regular attendance at school or otherwise – which can include elective home education - is suited to the child’s age, ability, aptitude and to any special educational needs the child may have.

Schedule 13 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986 places a duty on the Boards to take action where it appears to a Board that a parent of a child of compulsory school age in its area is failing to perform the duty imposed by Article 45(1). In these circumstances the Board can serve on the parent a notice requiring him/her, within a set period, to satisfy the Board that the child is, by regular attendance at school or otherwise, receiving efficient and appropriate full-time education.

In cases where a parent fails to demonstrate that the education provided meets the child’s specific needs the Board may, in accordance with Schedule 13 of the Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1986, serve a School Attendance Order (SAO) on the parent to require that the child becomes a registered pupil at the school named in the order. Where a parent applies for the order to be revoked the Board may do so if the parent has demonstrated that suitable arrangements have been made for the education of the child. If considered necessary, a Board may make application for an Education Supervision Order (ESO) to the Family Proceedings Court. Legal provisions for ESOs and Care Orders are contained in the Children (NI) Order 1995.

The effect of an ESO is that the responsibility for securing the child's education is removed from the parents and transferred to the Board named in the order.

The Boards may also provide support to parents who chose to home educate including advice and guidance on suitable learning materials, on training or examination options. The level of training and advisory support will relate to the age and developmental profile of the child.

Whilst the Education and Training Inspectorate provides inspection services for a number of organisations it does not undertake inspections of home education provision or have an oversight role in this regard. **(16th October)**

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Department for Employment and Learning

Beechcroft Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service

Mr Steven Agnew (GP – North Down) - To ask the Minister for Employment and Learning whether he is aware of the situation whereby young people in Beechcroft Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service inpatient unit are being denied access to education if they are enrolled in further education; and if so, what steps are being taken to ensure that this situation is remedied.

Dr Farry (Minister for Employment and Learning): I have been advised that when a young person is admitted to Beechcroft and they are enrolled on a further education course within a further education college, the health staff link with the relevant college and careers adviser to put in place a plan for stages of their admission. The outcomes of this plan can depend on the geographical location of the college and the subject that is being undertaken – some practical subjects cannot be taken outside of the college.

However close links are maintained, to ensure the young person can get back into study as soon as possible with intensive support from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) and liaison with the further education college to support recovery.

I can advise that further education colleges have a range of support services, including learning support, financial support and counselling, available to students with underlying illnesses through colleges' pastoral care arrangements and the Department's Additional Support Fund.

Students, whose attendance at college is adversely affected as a result of illness, may be given access to course materials via the virtual learning environment to facilitate remote study. Students in this situation may also have their timetables adjusted to allow more flexible study modes and, where possible, could be permitted to re-sit modules or repeat years.

I can also confirm my Departments careers advisers have a partnership agreement in place with Beechcroft to ensure young people within the unit have access to appropriate careers guidance. This agreement allows Beechcroft, in consultation with the careers adviser, the opportunity to select from a suite of services appropriate to the needs of its young people.

Careers services are then delivered as complementary to the careers education programme and appropriate to the individual's career planning needs.

Working with multi-disciplinary teams including professionals from education and health e.g. teachers, psychiatrists, therapists and psychologists, the careers adviser contributes to the young person's career plans by providing impartial careers guidance on the range of educational, training and employment opportunities available to them. **(14th October)**

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Department of Health

Pediatric Pathologists

Mr Phil Flanagan (Sinn Féin – Fermanagh and South Tyrone) - To ask the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many pediatric pathologists are currently employed by his Department and its agencies.

Mr J Wells (The Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): The regional specialism of Paediatric Pathology is held within the Belfast Trust. At the date of writing there were 2 (2.0 whole-time equivalent) Pediatrics Consultant Pathologists employed by the Trust. A newly commissioned post has been filled and a further Consultant is due to start work on the 13th October 2014, bringing the complement to 3 (3.0 whole-time equivalent). **(13th October)**

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Beechcroft Child and Mental Health Services

Mr Steven Agnew (GP – North Down) - To ask the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action is being taken to remedy the situation whereby young people in Beechcroft Child and Mental Health Services inpatient unit are being denied access to education within the unit if they are enrolled in further education.

Mr J Wells (The Minister for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): It is not the case that young people admitted to Beechcroft are denied access to further education. The Belfast Health and Social Care Trust has an agreement in place with the Department for Employment and Learning for a link worker to attend Beechcroft.

If a young person is admitted to Beechcroft and they have an education placement in a Further Education college, the health staff work in partnership with the college and the link worker to put an education plan in place for their admission. The plan will depend on the geographical location of the college and the subject that is being undertaken. Close links between health and education staff are maintained during the admission period. Where the duration of the admission is lengthy due to a severe illness, then the education plan is reviewed as necessary, as the young person may not be well enough to undertake the level of education at that specific time. **(14th October)**

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Department for Finance and Personnel

Grandparents Access Rights

Mr Trevor Clarke (DUP – South Antrim) - To ask the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has any plans to bring forward legislation to support grandparents' access rights.

Mr S Hamilton (Minister for Finance and Personnel): My Department has just published a consultation paper which invites views on the law relating to contact with children. In particular, the paper asks whether grandparents should automatically be able to apply for a contact order. **(15th October)**

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