

EMBARGOED UNTIL 13.30 ON THURSDAY 22 MARCH 2007

GOGGINS ANNOUNCES MAJOR NEW INITIATIVES FOR CHILDREN IN CARE

Health Minister Paul Goggins has announced a radical overhaul of services for children in care.

Proposals include significant new legislation, finance and support, seeking to ensure that young people in care can enjoy the same quality of life as children living with parents.

In unveiling the strategy Care Matters, the Minister set the following ambitious goals:

- Reducing the number of children and young people in care by 20%;
and
- Doubling the proportion of care leavers who are in education, employment or training at age 19.

The Minister also highlighted unnecessary bureaucracy in the present system of foster care, which sees foster parents having to ask social workers for permission before a child in their care can visit a friend, take part in routine after school activities or, on some occasions, even have a haircut.

Paul Goggins said: **“Children who are unable to live with their families are some of the most vulnerable in society. They are entitled to a normal life like everyone else, yet children in care often face uncertain futures.**

“Care Matters seeks to remove these uncertainties, build a bridge to the future and ensure that children in care can look ahead with the same confidence as other children do in terms of their health, their education and employment opportunities.”

The Minister highlighted some of the building blocks he will be putting in place to improve the present system. The first is to design, finance and build a range of services to prevent people coming into care. These include plans to:

- Introduce family therapeutic workers to work with families in need
- Reconfigure family support services so that they can more effectively assess and support children at risk of coming into care
- Work more closely with extended families.

The Minister continued: **“We also need to re-assure young people that when they reach 18, they will continue to have a roof over their head and enjoy the warmth and support of a family around them. The secret is to start early and agree the kind of help that will be given to them throughout their teens and beyond, bringing greater certainty and security into their lives.**

“We also need to recognise that some young people aged 16 or 17 do not want to live within traditional residential children’s homes or with foster carers. They need a different option. We will work with providers in the voluntary and statutory sector and with young people themselves to develop alternative accommodation that is safe but better suited to their needs.

The Minister then outlined ambitious new targets he has set for young people in care.

“The reform of health and social care in Northern Ireland is based on the central principle of putting people first. The proposals I have announced today will reduce the number of children and young people who come into care, and enhance the life-chances of those who do.

“Achieving this will not be easy. It will demand much closer co-operation across government and between government and the

statutory and voluntary sectors. The welfare of children, especially the welfare of marginalised children, must come first.

“That is why we are continuing to make significant investments in child and adolescent mental health services. The South and East Belfast Trust is planning to increase the number of inpatient beds for adolescents from 6 to 8 from 16 April 2007 with a further increase to 12 by this Summer. A new 18-bed unit for adolescents will open in mid-2009 to replace the existing unit at Knockbracken. Boards and Trusts are also being given an additional £0.5 million to further develop community-based specialist eating disorder services for children and young people.”

The Minister also highlighted how bureaucracy needs to be reduced to enhance young people’s lives.

“There is too much bureaucracy in the care system. In some cases foster parents need to ask permission from a social worker if a child in their care wants to meet friends, or go to the dentist, doctor or optician for routine check ups. This will change. Foster parents will have much more discretion to take day-to-day decisions that are normal for other parents.”

NOTES TO EDITORS:

1. Key elements of the Minister’s initiative includes:
 - Expanding the number of young people living with foster carers
 - Empowerment of foster carers to make everyday decisions for the young people in their care
 - Before children are brought into care, trusts need to demonstrate why a family placement is not possible
 - A new type of residential home for some 16/17 year olds to reflect their desire for independent living whilst maintaining safeguards for them.

- Case conferences-child properly informed about what is happening to them and having a much greater say in this
 - Much greater investment in educational equipment and tutoring in residential homes
 - Much closer co-operation with the Department of Education in assessing educational needs
 - an additional £500, 000 for Family Group Conferencing promoting its pivotal role in social workers
 - additional £1million invested in teams of multi disciplinary services in each Trust
 - forty additional specialist salaried foster carers-eight in each new Trust area
 - additional £1m to Therapeutic Family Support Services
 - new legislation to ensure that there is improved co-operation between agencies in providing family support services
 - extra £380,000 for children's community nursing services
 - extra £380,000 for mental health of school age population
 - no financial barriers for carers to adopt or apply for special guardianships
 - £1million to extend support packages targeted at children on the edge of criminality
 - RQIA to advise of the quality of residential care in Northern Ireland by March 2008.
2. A full copy of the consultation document and a consultation responses template is available from the Department's website at

http://www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/consultations/current_consultations.htm

The consultation closes on Friday 15 June 2007.

For further media information, please contact Jenny Magill, DHSSPS Information Office on 02890 520575 or 07833 668748.

