SOCRNI 2 2020 - DEPARTMENTS RESPONSES FROM Q&A

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| **Response** | **DoH** | **DE** | **DoJ** | **DfC** |
| **How will you ensure that the Programme for Government delivers on these (SOCRNI 2020) recommendations?** | The Executive’s aim is to have a new Programme for Government (PfG) ready in April 2021. The Executive Office has been engaging with a range of individuals and organisations, including representatives of business groups, community and voluntary organisations, rural and environment bodies, local government, churches, universities, colleges and trade unions. An extensive consultation is expected to launch shortly, to inform development of the new Programme.  New Decade, New Approach identifies the Children and Young People’s Strategy as one of the key supporting strategies that will underpin the PfG. This Strategy will act as the strategic framework through which departments will work together to improve the well-being of our children and young people, and deliver the draft PfG outcome on giving our children and young people the best start in life. While the Department of Education is leading on the development of the Children and Young People’s Strategy, my Department has been taking forward of a number of other cross-departmental strategies which will feed into it and will respond to many of the Commissioner’s calls to government. These include a new Online Safety Strategy for Northern Ireland, the forthcoming Strategy for Looked after Children: A Life Deserved, and a new Family and Parenting Support Strategy which it is the intention to consult on during 2021. My officials have been closely involved in the development of the Children and Young People’s Strategy and will continue to work with colleagues across government to identify actions needed to deliver the outcomes in the Strategy. The SOCRNI recommendations will inform this process, and the Children’s Commissioner will have an important role in scrutinising the effective delivery of the Strategy and its impact on the lives of children and young people. | The NI Executive is currently in the process of developing a new Programme for Government (PfG). It is anticipated that a public consultation on a draft PfG Outcomes Framework will be launched by the Executive Office early in the New Year, with a view to a final PfG being published by April 2021. My Department is participating in the process.  The Children and Young People's Strategy is identified in 'New Decade, New Approach' as one of the key supporting strategies which will underpin the Programme for Government. The Strategy is the strategic framework through which departments will work together to improve the well-being of our children and young people, and deliver the Programme for Government outcome on giving our children and young people the best start in life. It sets out eight outcomes we want to achieve for all children and young people, and identifies a number of areas of greatest focus. These include many of the issues identified in the SOCRNI report.  The Strategy has been agreed by the Executive and will shortly be published and laid in the Assembly. Following publication, the Executive will develop a cross-departmental Delivery Plan which will set out the actions being taken by departments over the next three years to improve children's well-being, deliver the outcomes in the Strategy and feed directly into the Programme for Government. There will be a public consultation on the Delivery Plan in 2021. | I note that, whilst the first number of questions are aimed at all Departments, there are clearly issues contained within them for which responsibility lies beyond the Department of Justice, in particular the questions about Sure Start and the Early Years curriculum, and also the rules governing the commissioning and procurement of services.  What I can say is that I am fully committed to working with Executive colleagues and Departmental officials to provide the necessary support and nurture for children and young people in Northern Ireland. Whilst this cross-departmental co-operation is given a statutory ‘impetus’ by the Children's Services Co-operation Act (NI) 2015, it is something with which we would engage regardless of the legislation, because we recognise the potential for children to end up in the justice system when the right support is not available. It is therefore in all our best interests, but particularly that of children, to prevent this from happening through the provision of universal services and specialist, tailored interventions at the earliest opportunity where issues are beginning to manifest themselves.  I believe that over the past number of years there has been increasing recognition that no one department can be responsible for delivering positive outcomes for children, and that we must get better at co-operation across all aspects of children’s lives. The legislation has assisted with this, as has the Programme for Government agenda which seeks to deliver on specific outcomes, including giving our children and young people the best start in life. As we look to revise and refresh the Programme for Government next year, I am sure that this aspiration will remain at its core, and the recommendations in your report will inform and challenge this work, as will the new 10 year Children and Young People’s Strategy and the actions arising from that comprehensive piece of work. | Having reflected on the questions asked of the panel, I would reiterate the Minister’s stated absolute commitment to rights, inclusion and equality and her undertaking that the Department will endeavour to expand on the wide body of work already undertaken on policy issues affecting children and young people, including SOCRNI 2020 issues, engaging with them throughout. She particularly mentioned her ambitious Housing reform agenda and her focus on addressing poverty through Housing. |
| **Response** | **DoH** | **DE** | **DoJ** | **DfC** |
| **(All) To deliver on the urgent matters in this report will require determination and cooperation across the Executive. What faith can we have in this being possible given the shenanigans that went on last week at the Executive meeting on Covid restrictions? Can the Executive pull together to deliver on these critical matters?** | As Minister of Health, I am fully committed to working in partnership with all of my Executive colleagues to deliver commitments within the Children and Young People’s Strategy and help every child reach their full potential. My department and the Department of Education have delivered a joint Strategy for Looked After Children: A Life Deserved. The Departments of Health and Justice —working closely with colleagues in Education, Economy, and the Department for Communities—recently launched a joint consultation on proposals for an integrated Care and Justice Campus, aimed at improving outcomes for a small, but often very vulnerable, group of children and young people. Also, departments have come together in response to the particular challenges caused by COVID-19 to ensure that childcare continued to be available, and to develop and implement a plan to address the issues faced by vulnerable children as a result of the pandemic. While all of us in the Executive sometimes have difficult decisions to make, I am confident that by continuing to work together we can build on these achievements for the benefit of all children and young people here. | Media reports focus on occasions or issues where there is disagreement. In reality, I and my Executive colleagues work co-operatively to address a wide range of government issues. | No specific answer noted - overarching answer above. | No specific answer noted. |
| **Response** | **DoH** | **DE** | **DoJ** | **DfC** |
| **(All) Five years ago the Assembly created the Children’s Services Cooperation Act, which requires all ‘children’s authorities’ including all Departments and statutory agencies to cooperate with each other to improve children’s wellbeing. How well do you think that government has met its duties in relation to this legislation over the past 5 years?** | In the five years since the Children’s Services Cooperation Act came into effect, there have been some excellent examples of cooperation aimed at improving outcomes for children and young people. My department has led on or contributed to a number of cross-departmental programmes in keeping with the principles of that legislation.  The Early Intervention and Transformation Programme (EITP) is a cross -departmental Delivering Social Change/ Atlantic Philanthropies Signature Programme underpinned by a £30m pooled fund. EITP has enabled collaboration across government, arms- length bodies and the voluntary and community sector. Across 19 projects, a substantial body of evidence has been generated to demonstrate that the programme has had a positive impact on the lives of children, young people and families. More generally, EITP has delivered substantial transformation across services for children and families with 14 projects now sustained beyond the lifetime of the programme.  In addition to involvement in developing the Children and Young Person’s Strategy provided for in the Act, my Department is also working on a number of other cross - departmental strategies which are intended to contribute directly to the achievement of its commitments. A joint Department of Health and Department of Education Strategy for Looked After Children Strategy: A Life Deserved is due to be published shortly and will set out a range of actions aimed at improving outcomes for children and young people who may be on the edge of care, are in care, or have left care.  The Executive recently approved the Online Safety Strategy, which was developed in recognition of growing concerns about the safety of children and young people when using the internet and electronic technology. The strategy cuts across the responsibility of several departments.  And I was pleased recently to launch, along with the Justice Minister, a consultation on proposals for an integrated Care and Justice Campus. The proposals contained in the consultation were developed jointly by my Department and the Department of Justice, with the involvement of the Departments for the Economy, Communities and Education. Successful implementation of the plans for a Campus will require continued cooperation across all of these sectors if we are to achieve the dual aims of preventing some young people being deprived of their liberty in the first place and providing the highest level of services capable of meeting the needs of those young people who do require time in secure accommodation for their own safety or the safety of others.  The response to the pandemic has also demonstrated the importance of co -operation between government departments and their respective arm’s length bodies. The Plan was developed in response to the challenges and risks facing children, young people and their families due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and is intended to reflect a series of activities that will be, or have been, undertaken across the Executive to meet the needs of vulnerable children, young people and their families during this time and in the recovery period after. | My Department has worked and continues to work collaboratively with other departments and children's authorities on a range of policy, strategy and programme developments including the Children and Young People's Strategy; the draft Looked After Children Strategy: A life Deserved; the Online Safety Strategy; the Family and Parenting Support Strategy; the Tackling Paramillitarism Programme; implementation of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Act 2016; and the Emotional Health and Well­ being Framework.  Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, my Department has worked co-operatively with others on a number of issues including supporting vulnerable children and families and facilitating children and young people returning to school safely.  Departments and their agencies co-operate on an ongoing basis on a wide range of matters affecting the well-being of children and young people including child protection, educational underachievement, support for children with special educational needs and transition into employment, training or further education. | No specific answer noted - overarching answer above. | No specific answer noted. |
| **Response** | **DoH** | **DE** | **DoJ** | **DfC** |
| **(All) What plans do the Departments have to reverse the loss of family support over the last decade? Will they commit to extending Sure Start more widely allied to the adoption of an early years curriculum?** | My Department has increased spending each year over the last decade on its Family and Child Care Programme of Care, and we continue to invest in and deliver a wide range of family support services through our Arm’s Length Bodies. My Department is also leading on the development of a new cross-Departmental Family and Parenting Support Strategy, which aims to improve family life through the following four outcomes: • Confident, competent, positive parenting; • Resilient, stable and strong families where relationships are positive, healthy and nurturing; • A society and culture which values and supports the role of parents and recognises the importance of strong families; and • Support that meets the needs of families experiencing particular challenges.  While the Department of Education has lead responsibility for Sure Start, the programme continues to be managed and administered by the Health and Social Care Board. | The Sure Start programme transferred to my ·Department in 2006 with an annual programme budget of around £9million. The programme has been significantly expanded since 2006 with a 2020/21 annual budget of around £27.4million and services expanded to support approximately 39,000 children and families in (at least) the 25% most disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland. Parental engagement is important within Sure Start which provides a range of family support initiatives aiming to improve outcomes for families and their children. I have agreed that a· review of the Sure Start programme will take place which will take account of the findings from the ongoing review by the Expert Panel on Educational Underachievement. Consideration will be given to the findings of both reviews in respect of the Sure Start programme. In addition, the Department is undertaking a refresh of its Early Years education and learning policy, which will consider all early years education and learning services including the Sure Start Programme. | No specific answer noted - overarching answer above. | No specific answer noted. |
| **Response** | **DoH** | **DE** | **DoJ** | **DfC** |
| **(All) Can all the Depts give a commitment to ensure that the voluntary and community sector as key partners in delivery to children and families are supported and that urgent work is done to correct the problems in commissioning, tendering and procurement which are preventing the sector make a difference in COVID and the recovery pathway from it?** | Through the core grant funding scheme, the Department of Health continues to support 66 voluntary and community organisations which carry out activities in support of the work of the statutory Health and Social Care sector. The budget for the scheme is £3.615m.  The Department has been issuing quarterly core grant payments for the 2020/21 financial year without subjecting funded organisations to the usual application and monitoring requirements. This has allowed those organisations to focus their resources on responding to COVID-19.  The Department will be inviting applications for core grant funding in 2022/23 through an open call process, which will provide organisations which have not previously received funding with an opportunity to apply to the scheme for the first time.   Finally, the wider HSC works collaboratively with the voluntary and community sector and has a wide range of service contracts in place. | The community and voluntary sector play a vital role in supporting children, young people and their families and I fully expect this will continue. | No specific answer noted - overarching answer above. | The Department is committed to ensuring that the voluntary and community sector is supported, empowered and engaged as partners in the delivery of outcomes. We are currently considering the strategic needs of the sector and the shape of a Recovery and Renewal agenda which will include a clear focus on funding mechanisms and relationships. We will ensure that NICCY is involved in shaping these plans. |
| **Response** | **DoH** | **DE** | **DoJ** | **DfC** |
| **(Health / All) Are we going to be in lockdown over Christmas, or will children be able to spend Christmas with their grandparents?** | I know that this is a special time of year and I entirely understand that this year - perhaps more than ever -people will want to spend time with their loved ones. Loneliness and isolation can in themselves have serious consequences, and it is important that people have the option for some contact with loved ones for a set time over the Christmas period.  For that reason, from 23 to the 27 December, limited changes are being made to household restrictions to allow some social contact. With any increase in social contact, however, comes increased risk, so it is important that all of us take personal responsibility to limit the spread of the virus and protect our loved ones, particularly if they are vulnerable.  It is also essential that we all stick to the tried and tested methods to reduce transmission of the virus – keeping our distance, washing our hands and wearing a face covering. Detailed guidance on the restrictions in place over the Christmas period is available at https://www.nidirect.gov.uk/articles/coronavirus-covid-19-regulations- guidance-restrictions-christmas.  There is no doubt that this has been a difficult year and as Health Minister I would like to take this opportunity to wish all of our children and young people—and their families—a safe and happy Christmas, as we begin to look forward with optimism to a new year. | No answer noted. | No specific answer noted - overarching answer above. | No specific answer noted. |
| **Response** | **DoH** | **DE** | **DoJ** | **DfC** |
| **(Health) Minister Swann was right to highlight the complexities of extending this legislation to under 16. Before we get there, there is considerable work to be done re implementation for 16-25 year olds – England have had this legislation for many years and have made little progress in this area. Will cross cut with children in care, leaving care, mental health, substance misuse and criminal justice involvement for 16-25 year olds.** | The Mental Capacity Act (‘MCA’) in Northern Ireland is being implemented in phases. The most notable provision in Phase One was the introduction of the Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (‘DoLS’), a new statutory process for deprivation of liberty. Provisions in relation to research and money & valuables in care homes were also introduced in Phase One. Phase One implementation took place between October and December 2019, with DoLS coming into operation on 2 December 2019. Implementation of future phases will include commencing the remainder of Part 2 of the MCA (which relates to decisions regarding care treatment and personal welfare), Lasting Powers of Attorney, Independent Mental Capacity Advocates and the repeal of the existing Mental Health (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 (‘MHO’) for persons over the age of 16. The latter also includes new safeguards for under 16s who will remain under the MHO. Further phased implementation of the MCA will be considered in early 2021 with future implementation dates to be confirmed as soon as practicable.   The MCA is a significant piece of legislation because, for the first time anywhere, mental capacity and mental health law have been fused within a single legislative framework, to deal with persons aged 16 and over on the basis of their capacity to make a decision in relation to their care, treatment (for a physical or mental illness) or personal welfare and not on the basis of their underlying condition. The MCA has been widely praised by stakeholders for its innovative and inclusive approach. Whilst the MCA provides a substitute decision-making framework, it is fundamentally a supported decision-making statute. Sections 5 and 6 note that all practicable help and support must be provided to a person before that person is deemed to lack capacity. This is a powerful statutory provision to ensure a supported decision making framework is fully in place, before a substitute decision making framework comes into play. Combining the approach of supported decision making and a holistic best interest and the fusing of mental health and mental capacity legislation means that the MCA promotes personal autonomy and the rights of the person. No longer will decisions be made because of a diagnosis, because of the wills and wants of clinicians or family members; rather the decisions will be in line with the wishes of the person.  As part of this inclusive approach to supporting individuals to make their own decisions, the MCA does not distinguish between people of different ages. MCA applies equally to everyone who is over 16 and who lacks capacity and should not be applied differently based on the person’s age. There are no provisions of the MCA that apply differently to 16-25 year olds than to any other age group. If the Department is advised of any settings in which the MCA is not being properly applied, Departmental officials will investigate and ensure the issue is rectified. The Department has developed a number of resources which provide support in applying the MCA in different settings. These are available on the MCA website at https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/mca | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| **Response** | **DoH** | **DE** | **DoJ** | **DfC** |
| **(Health) It is shocking to note that mental health issues facing our children and young people are 25%higher than the rest of the UK. Sadly, the pandemic will have a significant impact on the mental health of our children and young people. Can the Minister advise if additional resources are being directed or being planned to be directed to mental health services for children and young people. This area must be the highest priority for the Department of Health post pandemic.** | Promoting and supporting the mental health of the people of Northern Ireland is a priority for the Executive and the challenges we experience, some a legacy of the troubles, are well documented at this stage.  Investment in CAMHS is now over £20 million annually, double what it was 10 years ago. This figure does not include investments made by the Public Health Agency in a wide range of children’s services, such as family support services, safeguarding and primary care services. In addition, over a half a million pounds of non-recurrent investment from transformation money was made available for CAMHS-specific projects in Northern Ireland in 2019/20.  Since I became Health Minister, I have identified mental health as a significant priority, and the pandemic has underlined the need for sustained focus on this area. I moved to appoint an interim Mental Health Champion, to act as a public ad vocate for mental health and to integrate thinking about mental health and wellbeing across government and in all aspects of policy making; I am aware that the Commissioner has given her endorsement to the appointment. My department is leading on a cross-Government Action Plan to take forward the agreed recommendations from the ‘Still Waiting’ Report. Recently, my department invested £1.5 million to support the implementation of the Mental Health Action Plan, including approximately £200k to take forward a Managed Care Network for acute CAMHS, to enable clinical expertise to be shared across the region, resulting in improved and more tailored care for young people who need it. A further £1.5 million has been secured to support the implementation of the Emotional Health and Wellbeing in Education Framework.  These actions will lay the groundwork for the much-needed, longer term, strategic improvements which will be set out in a new 10 year Mental Health Strategy. I have given my commitment to publishing a draft strategy for consultation before the end of this year, and I can assure you that the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people here will continue to be one of my highest priorities. | N/A | N/A | N/A |
| **Response** | **DoH** | **DE** | **DoJ** | **DfC** |
| **(Educ’ & Health Ministers) Could the Ministers for Health and Education give a commitment that the educational needs of care experienced children will have specific consideration in the educational underachievement task force’s work – both those in care and those who have left care?** | As Health Minister, I can confirm that the educational needs of care experienced children, including those who have left care, is an area of continued focus for my department, working closely with Minister Weir’s department.  Officials from my department have recently briefed the Expert Panel set up under New Decade, New Approach to examine and address the links between educational underachievement and social disadvantage. The focus of this briefing was on the educational attainment of care experienced children and young people, and actions being taken to address the gaps between the achievement of these young people and that of their peers.  The joint Health and Education Strategy for Looked After Children: A Life Deserved is due to be published in the very near future and will set out a range of measures aimed at improving outcomes for children and young people who may be on the edge of care, are in care, or have left care—to help them achieve their full potential in line with their peers. This includes commitments to action around Learning and Achieving. A strategic action plan will be developed to support the implementation of the strategy.  Linked to this work, a task and finish group has already been established and is currently considering pathways into Further Education.  A Regional Strategic Multi-Agency Group on Attainment and Progression in Education and into Employment for Looked After Children and Care Leavers has also been set up to: • understand the challenges and deficits encountered by children looke d after and care leavers at key transition stages to inform a plan for change; • improve the understanding of the effectiveness of current supports for Looked After Children; and • ensure consistency and equity for looked after children and care leavers in the education system and ETE opportunities post compulsory education. | The Departments of Health and Education have jointly developed a Strategy for Looked After Children Life Deserved: "Caring" for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland'. This joint Strategy aims to improve the wellbeing of children & young people who are looked after and provide support for children with special educational needs and transition into employment, training or further education.  The Expert Panel is also considering a wide range of issues including educational inequalities. Its engagement to date has been wide ranging including organisations who have worked with care experienced children. | N/A | N/A |
| **Response** | **DoH** | **DE** | **DoJ** | **DfC** |
| **Educ' Minister: NICCY has continuously over many years highlighted the educational inequalities facing children in NI and this report again emphasises the widening gap. The pandemic will widen inequalities even further over the coming months - can the Minister advise what action the Executive/ Assembly will take to address this urgent issue post pandemic?** | N/A | An Expert Panel was appointed from September 2020 to consider the issues associated with persistent educational underachievement linked to social disadvantage. The panel is considering a wide range of issues including educational inequalities. Its engagement to date has been wide ranging including organisations who have worked with care experienced children. The panel has been tasked to produce an Action Plan by 31 May 2021. | N/A | N/A |
| **Response** | **DoH** | **DE** | **DoJ** | **DfC** |
| **Education: This has been extraordinary year for all young people across Northern Ireland. As a result schools have left out so much work and this year is being spent trying to catch up. You need to act on the emotional and educational wellbeing for ­ young people through cancelling all exams meant to take place in 2020  Education: are you aware of the levels of stress on young people in schools at the moment, particularly those in Years 12-14? Do you understand that schools are constantly assessing these young people because of uncertainty over whether exams will be able to proceed, and that your insistence that they will does not bring certainty, but instead constant pressure put on young people?** | N/A | In relation to concerns regarding pupils' increased anxiety, the emotional health and wellbeing of children and young people continues to be a high priority for my Department.  The suite of adaptations to CCEA qualifications, which I agreed on 9 October and 6 November include the omission of assessments for whole units for most GCSEs, and health related adaptations for AS and A Levels. This provides a significant reduction in the burden of assessment for young people whilst still allowing as much opportunity as possible to cover the content of the specifications.  Northern Ireland has also gone significantly further than other jurisdictions to reduce the assessment burden for young people and to recognise the ongoing disruption and difficulties that we face. The suite of adaptations to GCSE, AS and A Level qualifications are designed to take account not only of lost learning during the period from March to June 2020 but also to reflect the ongoing disruption that we are currently experiencing during the 2020/21 academic year.  It is my priority that examinations to award CCEA qualifications should go ahead as planned in 2021. In these uncertain times, the familiarity of the exam system provides greater certainty as learners know what they are working towards and how it will be awarded.  However, I have been keeping the situation under review, and my officials have been working closely with CCEA to develop a range of further mitigations and contingencies to respond to the fluid public health situation. This work is at an advanced stage and I hope to be in a position to provide more information very soon. | N/A | N/A |
| **Response** | **DoH** | **DE** | **DoJ** | **DfC** |
| **Justice: Re over-representation of children identified as Catholic in the youth justice system** | N/A | N/A | As you know, the Youth Justice Agency has no control over the religious background of children entering the justice system. Nevertheless, we recognise that there is a clear disparity in the religious demographic of children in the system, particularly in custody. I am therefore pleased to inform you that research has been formally commissioned to try and better understand the reasons for the over-representation of certain groups, including Catholics, in the system. The tender for this research was launched on 1 December, with a view to completing the research sometime around mid-2021. | N/A |
| **Response** | **DoH** | **DE** | **DoJ** | **DfC** |
| **Justice: Re ACES** | N/A | N/A | We are indeed becoming increasingly aware and better informed about the impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) on the lives and longer-term outcomes for children and young people. The Youth Justice Agency is a member of the NI Strategic Steering Group on Trauma Informed Practice established to support the continuous momentum and integration of the ACE agenda and support the Early Intervention Transformation Programme (EITP) Trauma Informed Practice Development Workforce. As such, the YJA has signed up to become a trauma informed Agency, and has an internal steering group working to an action plan to achieve this end over a 3 year period.  It would be useful if we can build upon the momentum around developing a trauma informed workforce across health and education with a focus on frontline operational services that interface with children and families. I would also welcome Departments continuing to work together to support this work to both reduce the onset of ACEs as well as mitigate against their impact.  As I have already said, we must get better at recognising the underlying needs of children and meeting those needs as early as possible to prevent issues becoming more prevalent and entrenched. There is no doubt that major developments, such as the new 10 year Mental Health Strategy and the Joint Health and Justice Secure Campus, will provide significant assistance in this work over the coming years. | N/A |
| **Response** | **DoH** | **DE** | **DoJ** | **DfC** |
| **Justice: Re DoJ's role in promoting positive engagement and increasing trust between children, young people and the police** | N/A | N/A | As you know, the PSNI is operationally independent of the Department of Justice, and I am committed to respecting that independence so I will not comment specifically on this issue which you may wish to redirect to them.  I will say, however, that I know it is an issue on which PSNI continues to make progress. They have appointed a dedicated Youth Champion and hold regular meetings with yourselves and others to discuss specific issues as they arise. They have put significant work into enabling young people to have their voice heard on policing issues, and have updated training to PSNI officers on how to use strength based approaches to young people. I have no doubt that there may inevitably be individual cases or issues which attract negative publicity or feedback – and rightly so if a public servant falls below the standards expected of them – but there are overwhelming numbers of positive interactions where police keep vulnerable individuals safe, and this should not be overlooked. The overall direction of travel is positive, and the progress made in engaging with children and young people should be recognised. | N/A |
| **Response** | **DoH** | **DE** | **DoJ** | **DfC** |
| **DfC: Madeline pointed out the difficulty faced by young people during COVID in relation to having their views heard and a view that they are being ignored or looked over. How has, or how can, your department ensure that the voices of young people are heard during this difficult time?** |  |  |  | As Minister reported, the Department will continue to listen and respond to the voices of young people, directly and through engagement and consultation with all relevant sectors and bodies. This will include continued and focused engagement with The Northern Ireland Assembly Commission’s Youth Assembly, as well as other departments including the Department of Education. |