



Assembly Update: September 2015

Oral Questions

Issues	Question	Answer
<p>Childcare</p>	<p>Judith Cochrane (Alliance) asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister, given the implementation of the childcare strategy, for their assessment of the capacity of the current system to meet increased demand on services and trained staff.</p> <p>Rosaleen McCorley (Sinn Fein) asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister given the importance of child development in early years, to outline how any new childcare strategy will address child development issues.</p>	<p><u>Ms J McCann (Junior Minister, Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister):</u> Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will answer questions 1 and 10 together. The Executive's draft 10-year strategy for affordable, integrated childcare is out for consultation until mid-November. It fulfils a Programme for Government commitment and puts child development at the heart of the Executive's vision for childcare. A central aim of the draft strategy is to give all of our children the best start in life, preparing them for lifelong well-being and achievement, thereby creating the basis for a better and more prosperous future.</p> <p>The draft strategy sets out the Executive's vision for childcare, which is one based on shared aims and objectives. It proposes 22 areas of development where action is needed to give effect to that vision and proposes the creation of a significant number of new childcare places to meet need. We recognise that that will lead to an increased demand for skilled childcare workers, and we fully expect the current workforce to expand. Workforce development is a key element of the draft strategy, building on the key first actions launched in 2013. There are a number of specific proposals for training to enhance skills and create pathways into working in childcare. We are working closely with the Department for Employment and Learning on the detail of estimating the extent of demand for new training places and the cost of meeting that demand. We are also undertaking a skills audit in each of the childcare partnerships' respective areas. Delivering the childcare strategy and achieving its aims and objectives will require coordinated action from a range of Departments and services.</p> <p><u>Mrs Cochrane:</u> I thank the Minister for her answer. Given that children born at the start of this mandate started school last week, does the Minister think that it is acceptable that the parents of those children have been disadvantaged for four years and will continue to be disadvantaged due to the failure of OFMDFM to deliver real, tangible action on affordable childcare, even when money was allocated for it?</p> <p><u>Ms J McCann:</u> I assume that the Member is talking about Bright Start and the 15 actions. The money has been allocated. Several millions have already been spent in those childcare programmes. I have been involved in situations in which a number of service providers</p>

came and got money for different elements of Bright Start and those first actions. We were concentrating on school-age childcare because that is where the need was identified in the beginning. I think that that is getting rolled out. This will complement the childcare strategy, as I said. This is a 10-year strategy. Money and resources have been put into this strategy, and, hopefully, it will be rolled out in the same way as the first actions were. Obviously, we always hope to do more in childcare — you can never have enough childcare — but we hope that this will provide a quality service, an affordable service, which is very important for people, particularly families on a low income. We certainly hope to make those childcare places available.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a freagraí. I thank the Minister for her answers. How will disadvantaged children be catered for in any childcare strategy?

Ms J McCann: As I said, it is important that disadvantaged children and disadvantaged families are included in the strategy. As I said in my response to the substantive question, a central aim is to give all our children the best start in life. Early care and education initiatives, including childcare, should, first and foremost, be focused on the developmental needs of the child.

Investment in the strategy must also address the needs of disadvantaged children to ensure better life chances for them and help to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty. It cannot simply be about servicing a labour market. That is what this particular strategy looks at: it is about the developmental programmes that are there to develop a child and meet the needs of that child.

We also know that investment in the early years leads to greater economic, social and emotional benefits later in life at an individual and societal level, and it can counter the effects of that disadvantage and deprivation. That includes children in workless households as well as working households. We need to make childcare more affordable. That is essential because 70% of children in poverty are in families where at least one parent is working. It is very clear that we need to ensure that those low-income families are provided for as well.

Just last week, we had child poverty figures published in DSD's 'Households Below Average Income' report. Again, there has been a three-point rise in relative child poverty.

Sandra Overend (UUP) asked why it OFMDFM failed to spend the £12 million that was set aside in the Programme for Government for accessible affordable childcare. What is its assessment of the number of people stuck on benefits who would rather be in work but cannot because of this OFMDFM failure?

Steven Agnew (Green Party) stated that while he welcomed the publication of the consultation on the childcare strategy, to some extent the strategy will only be as good as the resources that follow it. He asked the Junior Minister what work had been done to cost the proposals in the childcare strategy and if those costs were likely to be met.

We cannot separate child poverty from poverty and families. That is very clear. They cannot be separated; they have to be seen in a holistic way.

Ms J McCann: To answer your last question first, I do not think that it is a failure of OFMDFM. We are going to see from the Westminster Government not just welfare reform but cuts to tax credits, which will hit families and actually put people out of work. More people will be out of work because of the decrease in tax credits, which will very much come to the fore.

To answer your first question about funding, between 2011 and 2015, a budget of £12 million was to be ring-fenced in support of the childcare strategy and £4.7 million has already been allocated and, to date, £3.4 million has been spent. Money has been spent. OK, not all of it has been spent but, at the same time, this is all going to be part of the strategy. I also remind Members — this is very important — that this is an Executive childcare strategy, so all Departments have responsibility for it.

Ms J McCann: The development of the strategy was a co-designed process, as the Member will know. We have been out talking directly to stakeholder organisations that provide childcare. More importantly, we have been talking to parents who need that childcare. All that has been costed within those proposals. As the individual actions are rolled out and delivered, we will have to look at an economic case for that. Certainly, there have already been costings, and the resources needed will be very easily identifiable within those.

Written Assembly Questions

Issues	Question	Answer
Funding	<p>Alex Easton (DUP) asked the Minister for Employment and Learning for an update on what action his Department is taking to resolve the problems regarding ESF.</p> <p>Peter Weir (DUP) asked the Minister for Employment and Learning how much money in total is owed by his Department to organisations through the ESF and how much of this is more than six months in arrears.</p>	<p>To relieve financial pressures on organisations and to speed up the payment process, it was agreed that, from 1 July 2015, the following would apply: for unpaid claims submitted with claim periods up to the end of March 2014, 80% of the ESF/DEL contribution (65%) would be paid with completion of the verification process carried out at a later date. The remaining 20% would be paid when claims are fully vouched; and for unpaid claims submitted with claim periods from April to December 2014, 50% of the ESF/DEL contribution (65%) would be paid, with completion of the verification process carried out at a later date. The remaining 50% would be paid when the claims are fully vouched. These payments commenced to all eligible organisations on 6 July 2015 and have all now been paid. In addition, a new claim inspection test grid and staff guidance to vouch claims was introduced on the 17 June 2015, and a new ESF claims tracking spreadsheet was also introduced in June 2015 to monitor the progress of claims being processed. For the 2014-2020 ESF Programme, the Department has also made available a 5% advance payment to ensure that any initial cash-flow or financial issues are avoided for project promoters. To date, 36 advance payments have been made to organisations.</p> <p>Given the overlap in these three questions, I have combined the responses into a single, composite response. Under the 2007-2013 European Social Fund (ESF) Programme, there are 169 outstanding claims for 60 organisations which remain to be processed. The potential payment value of these claims is £7.58m. The 60 organisations are broken down as follows: 53 voluntary & community organisations; three District Councils; and four further education colleges. Of the 169 claims which are outstanding, my Department has received, and is currently processing, 163 claims. The breakdown of when these 163 claims were received is as follows: Claims received 1 July to 11 September 2015: 65, Claims received 1 April to 30 June 2015: 38. Claims received before 31 March 2015: 60, The potential payment value of the 60 claims received before 31 March 2015 is £1.54m. There are six outstanding claims which have yet to be submitted from organisations. My officials wrote to these organisations on 12 August 2015, encouraging them to submit their outstanding claims. Submission of the outstanding claims will enable my Department to process</p>

and pay these claims as soon as possible. Since July 2015, my Department has released £5.53m in payments to organisations, including advance partial payments to help ease the financial pressures being incurred by organisations. My Department is in the closure phase of the programme, which ended in March 2015, and is therefore committed to having these claims processed and paid as quickly as possible. There are no other European projects funded by my Department.

Committee evidence

Committee	Topic	Evidence
Department of Employment & Learning	European Social Fund Update by DEL Officials	Report of proceedings can be downloaded from here: http://aims.niassembly.gov.uk/officialreport/minutesofevidencereport.aspx?AgendaId=14968&eveID=8566

Motions

Issue	Motion
Increasing Free Childcare	<p>Patsy McGlone (SDLP)</p> <p>To read the debate please click here.</p> <p><i>Resolved:</i></p> <p><i>That this Assembly notes the 2014 Employers for Childcare survey that indicated that 46% of parents in Northern Ireland reduced their working hours or left work due to a lack of affordable childcare; recognises that greater childcare provision would be a key catalyst in bolstering the economy, retaining a skilled workforce and improving the lives of working families; further notes that the Childcare Bill announced in the Chancellor of the Exchequer's July Budget will increase free preschool childcare entitlement for three- and four-year-olds to 30 hours a week in England; and calls for the establishment of an equal 30 hours of free childcare locally as part of a move towards the establishment of a universal childcare model.</i></p>