

Northern Ireland Assembly Disability Monitor



MONDAY 14 DECEMBER 2009

**Centre on Human Rights for
People with Disabilities**

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**A Minutes from Committee Meetings, Week Ending 4
December 2009**

Wednesday 2 December 2009

COMMITTEE FOR EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Matters Arising

The Committee for Employment and Learning noted the response on Autism to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety. The Committee for Employment and Learning noted this correspondence and agreed to forward it to the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety.

The Committee for Employment and Learning noted the RNIB proposals and the Department of Employment and Learning's response. The Members of the Committee for Employment and Learning agreed to forward the Minister for Employment and Learning's response, together with responses from the Further Education colleges and universities, to the RNIB for comment.

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B Last Week's Assembly Business

Private Members' Business

Under 25s Not in Education, Employment or Training

Sue Ramsey (Sinn Fein) begged to move “that this Assembly notes that one third of all benefit claimants are now under 25 years old and that one fifth of people aged 16 to 24 are classed as ‘not in education, employment or training’; welcomes the study on this issue currently being undertaken by the Department for Employment and Learning; and calls on the Minister to bring forward a cross-departmental strategy and programme, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to prevent these young people becoming a lost generation.”

Sue Ramsey highlighted that the growing number of young people who are facing unemployment and who are not in any kind of education, training or employment should concern all of us in the Assembly. It has an impact on those young people's health, education, aspirations and futures.

Northern Ireland has 47,000 16 to 24-year-olds not in education, employment or training. That is one in five of 16 to 24-year-olds, and it is a staggering figure. Of that number, 12,000 are aged 16 to 18. The Committee for Employment and Learning brought a similar motion to the Assembly. However, it is time that the Assembly focused on this issue and the consequences that it has for our young people and communities. It is also time that the Assembly found out what action the Department and the Executive will take to reduce those numbers and get young people back into employment, education or training.

Sue Ramsey thanked the Minister for Employment and Learning for beginning to put in place a study to consider the issue and the impact that it has on those young people, who are known as NEETs — that is, not in education, employment or training. In Sue Ramsey's view, this issue is not the sole responsibility of the Minister or the

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Department for Employment and Learning; it requires a cross-departmental and Executive-led response.

There is a 12% unemployment rate for people who are aged under 25 in the North. That is four times the unemployment rate of those who are aged 25 and over. They have carried the brunt of many of the current job losses, and Sue Ramsey assumed that many Members would talk about personal experience and the experiences of their constituents. The reality, however, is that the current recession has led to a 90% increase in job losses in the past year. The Assembly cannot afford to ignore that situation.

Failure to act the previous time that there was a big rise in youth unemployment meant that many young people simply became long-term unemployed. That meant that they went on to have children and brought up their families in a situation in which work was not part of their lives and in which their children grew up in a cycle of poverty and disadvantage. That has partly contributed to the North's economic inactivity rate, which, at 29.5%, is above that in England. It is crucial, therefore, that the Assembly does not allow this generation of young people to be lost to such disadvantage and poverty.

There are serious costs, economic and otherwise, to failing to address the needs of young people who are not in employment, education or training. Being in such a situation is estimated to cost £100,000 over a young person's lifetime. Therefore, failing to help the 12,000 16 to 18-year-olds who are NEETs will cost the economy well over £1 billion. We cannot afford that sort of cost, and we cannot afford to fail to harness the talents of many of those young people. A cross-departmental approach is needed because the mental and physical health costs of those young people must be considered. A recent study estimated that some 10% of young NEETs would have died within 10 years of finding themselves in that situation.

Sue Ramsey pointed out that young people who are most likely to not be in education, employment or training are from disadvantaged communities, have become disaffected with school, have spent time in care or custody, or are disabled. Young people want to learn skills

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for work and independent living. There are clear links between young people who underachieve at school and go on to become a NEET. That makes improving literacy and numeracy outcomes for all children crucial.

Sue Ramsey feels it is also crucial that the Department of Education works with other Departments to address the underlying causes of young people's becoming NEET and to put in place an early prevention programme. There must be commitment to creating a programme in schools to target children and young people, some of whom Sue Ramsey highlighted earlier, who are already known to be at serious risk of being categorised as NEET.

Sue Ramsey understands that the Minister for Employment and Learning has asked the Department for Employment and Learning to undertake research on the level and nature of the issue. Sue Ramsey registered her support for the Minister for Employment and Learning taking that action. Indeed, it shows that he is also concerned for those young people. Sue Ramsey wanted to know when the study would be made available and what action is likely to come from it.

Sue Ramsey's main concern is why the kind of strategy and approach towards the issue that is taken in England, Scotland and Wales has yet to be taken here. In England, Scotland and Wales, there is clear public sector agreement to reduce the overall number of young people who are categorised as NEET. In Wales, there is a target of 7% reduction by 2010. In England, the target is 2%. In Scotland, there is a specific commitment to reduce the overall number.

While Sue Ramsey thinks that some of those targets do not go far enough, there is no specific target in the North. It is crucial that one is developed in order to begin to clearly address the issue. She wants to hear the Minister for Employment and Learning's view on the development of a specific target to reduce the number of young people who are categorised as NEET. Sue Ramsey asked that, if that information is not available to the Minister for Employment and Learning today, it is followed up in writing.

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In England, Scotland and Wales, a strategy and associated funding has led to specific programmes being put in place to help young people back into training or the workforce. In England and Wales, there are guaranteed jobs, training or work placements for all young people between 18 and 24 who have been unemployed for more than 12 months. Again, Sue Ramsey wants to hear whether the Minister for Employment and Learning has considered bringing such a scheme to life here.

In England, Scotland and Wales, the future jobs fund, which is aimed primarily at young people aged between 18 and 24, has been allocated a total of £1 billion to create 150,000 jobs. At present, 95,000 of those jobs have been allocated. Sue Ramsey wants to find out the Assembly's current position on the creation of a future jobs fund and how the Minister might see that moving forward. She asked whether the Department for Employment and Learning had allocated specific funding and if so, how much and with what focus.

In saying that, Sue Ramsey does not underestimate the nature of the problem or the scale of the task that the Assembly must address. The Assembly cannot afford to say that because there is a recession, it is not possible to begin to assist young people who most need it. If the North is not to produce another lost generation of young people, it is critical that the Executive act now to make that a priority and that the Minister for Employment and Learning is supported by his colleagues in developing a strategy as a matter of urgency.

The Committee for Employment and Learning looked at the matter and brought forward a similar motion. However, Sue Ramsey was keen to debate the motion before the House so that, at least, the Assembly could obtain information from the Minister for Employment and Learning. Sue Ramsey appreciates that the Minister for Employment and Learning has taken forward and asked for that study. She also stated that she would appreciate, if the Minister for Employment and Learning would answer the questions that she posed.

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During the debate three Members touched on the impact that these policies had on people with disabilities.

Thomas Buchanan (DUP) claimed that the motion before the House was more of a take-note motion that sets out the action that has already been taken by the Minister for Employment and Learning to produce a cross-departmental strategy and programme, with the Executive's support, to assist all of those young people who are currently on benefits and in the NEET category.

Thomas Buchanan welcomed the initiative which the Minister for Employment and Learning has already taken and looked forward to completion of the study resulting in a strategic programme, which he hoped would pave the way towards helping and encouraging young people to remain in education, employment and training programmes and wean them off the benefits culture that is prevalent in Northern Ireland society.

Thomas Buchanan asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to give the Assembly an indication of when he anticipates the study will be completed and the programme in place, and how he proposes to roll it out throughout Northern Ireland. Until that happens, we will not see a difference in the number of young people who are in that situation.

The Committee for Employment and Learning, in considering why there seems to be such a large proportion of young people in the NEET category, received numerous briefings from a number of organisations, and Thomas Buchanan hoped that the Minister for Employment and Learning and the Department for Employment and Learning were engaging with them on this same matter.

Thomas Buchanan felt that it was alarming that there are some 47,000 young people in Northern Ireland who are in the NEET category and who are not utilising their full potential in their youth. He believed that would hinder them in the future. However, these young people may be divided into two categories. There are those who, for one reason or another, have no desire to undergo further training or

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get on the employment ladder. They are caught in what Thomas Buchanan called a “benefit trap”. Equally, there are those who have a general interest in furthering their education and training to get into a place of employment, but, on account of some learning disability, difficulty or social circumstance, have disengaged from learning for a substantial part of their adolescence due to a lack of additional support.

That is why addressing the matter adequately requires a cross-departmental strategy. Incentives must be provided to encourage those in the benefit trap back into employment. We have a situation in Northern Ireland whereby some young people are better off financially in receipt of benefits than in employment. That creates a negative impact; it must be challenged and changed to give the young people the incentive to get back into the place of employment. Also, additional support must be provided for those with learning difficulties.

Northern Ireland’s further education colleges are well placed and have a vital role to play in meeting the needs of young people in the NEET category. Some of the colleges are currently at the sharp end, working with and seeking to re-engage those young people to entice them back into education, employment and training by delivering essential skills, building confidence and helping them to get the vocational and professional skills that they need to make progress in today’s society. For employers and local communities, those people are key partners in responding to the social and economic challenges that we face. Therefore, more work must be done with, and support given to, colleges delivering for the young people in that situation.

In seeking to address this matter, the Scottish Executive realised that the more choice they provided, the greater the chance of getting young people back into places of employment. That is something that the Assembly should be looking at: the provision of more choice to encourage young people back into employment. Thomas Buchanan expressed his support for the motion.

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Pat Ramsey (SDLP) supported the motion that Sinn Féin tabled. As the motion stated, the Minister for Employment and Learning initiated a cross-departmental study, and he intends to implement policies that are based on his clear recommendations. Pat Ramsey pointed out that the Minister for Employment and Learning has already introduced innovative proposals, including the Step Ahead initiative and programme-led apprenticeships, which David McClarty (UUP) mentioned. Pat Ramsey commended the Minister for Employment and Learning on those initiatives.

Pat Ramsey is sure that most people expected the Executive to introduce urgently a comprehensive Budget, a Programme for Government and an investment strategy to deal with the recession. Every other Administration in the world that he knows of, including the other devolved Governments, have put in place holistic economic strategies to deal with the recession. He feels that begs the question of why have Northern Ireland's Executive has not done so.

Northern Ireland's under-25s' workforce has been seriously affected by the recession. Many were in temporary positions or were agency workers and therefore were the first to lose their jobs when the recession hit. The Assembly knows from experience and knowledge that many people's situations and the social and economic environment in which they live have colluded to prevent them from entering employment.

Such people include lone parents, people with caring responsibilities, those with low educational attainment or low levels of work skills, and, of course, people with disabilities. Many other situations have been well documented, and those who in such situations become demoralised, demotivated and disconnected from economic life. They become dependent on benefits, and the route to work becomes risky and more difficult. As the motion states, people become "lost", and complex interventions are required, some short term and some long term, to allow them to contribute fully to society.

Pat Ramsey claimed that is not to say that there are no opportunities now. There are programmes in place for adults with poor essential

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skills through the Department for Employment and Learning. Help is available to people to overcome barriers, and a range of training initiatives is available at different skill levels. DETI has a range of initiatives aimed at increasing employment and self-employment opportunities. On that point, Pat Ramsey asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to provide an update on the Steps to Work programme in his constituency.

Whatever the barriers, Pat Ramsey feels it must be ensured that they can be, and are, overcome. That will require action from many Departments. Such action should be led by the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and should be based on an overall anti-recession strategy. The greatest incentive for people to get back into training and education, to get over the barriers and become motivated, is the prospect of real work at the end of the process. History has taught us that there is nothing more demoralising for people than going through cycles of training, where hope is followed by unemployment, disappointment and cynicism. We must create a momentum of opportunity, inclusion and hope, and we must re-engage those people who are lost, whether they are 16 or 60.

Pat Ramsey believes that the region needs an Administration that act competently; that provide vision and leadership; that design their strategies and actions on current global and local economic realities, and include everyone. The DUP and Sinn Féin are the establishment now, and it is under their system and during their watch that these problems are happening. The people of Northern Ireland cannot understand Sinn Féin and the DUP's refusal to produce a new Budget, a new Programme for Government and a new investment strategy. Those parties collude to ensure that they are the major power brokers. Therefore, Pat Ramsey feels it is time that they started to use that power, on this and many other issues, to benefit the people, and in particular the young people, of Northern Ireland.

According to Paul Butler (Sinn Féin) it is estimated that young people who are not in education, employment or training can cost the economy here in the region of £250 million a year. The Programme for Government gives a commitment to tackling the difficult issue of

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education, employment and training. Not only are the Assembly trying to address it here but research has been done and several papers have been written on the subject across Europe.

However, Paul Butler senses that the Assembly is not taking the same approach as the Scottish or Welsh Executives or even the British Government. Although policies such as Steps to Work and New Deal are in place, there seems to be no overall strategy for dealing with the issue, given that unemployment in the 18 to 25 age bracket has doubled to 20% since 2007. The Minister for Employment and Learning has implemented schemes such as the apprenticeship programme, but there is a sense, particularly among young people, that the Assembly are not doing enough to tackle the issue.

Some Members praised the Minister, and Paul Butler welcomed the fact that some steps are being taken. However, the Minister for Employment and Learning gave an interview to the 'Belfast Telegraph' recently saying that some young people are like vampires because they do not get out of their beds until 3.00 pm after having been out on the streets all night. Such statements do not help, and Paul Butler hopes that the Minister for Employment and Learning will clear that up. Whatever the Minister for Employment and Learning was trying to convey with that remark, it sent out the negative message that young people do not want to work or to be in training. Paul Butler was not blaming the Minister for Employment and Learning as this is a complex issue.

David McClarty (UUP) called for an early years intervention strategy. By the time young people reach the crucial age of 15 and 16, they seem to drop out of school and do not want to be involved in further education, employment or training. A lot of the problems are associated with the early years, and Paul Butler agrees that a joined-up approach is needed between the Department of Education and the Department for Employment and Learning to address the issue. However, a series of issues must be considered, such as young people having disabilities or coming from broken homes. Paul Butler knows from dealing with young people over the years that unemployment is generational in that their grandfathers and fathers

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probably never worked, so there is no encouragement for them to go into either training or employment.

Paul Butler was impressed with the Scottish Executive's more focused approach of tracking young people through to further education and of having a more interventionist strategy to get people into education or training. However, the Assembly obviously wants them eventually to get into employment. In Britain, the Chancellor has guaranteed a work placement to all those who are aged under 25 who have been unemployed for a year. The British Government will introduce legislation to make education and training compulsory for people from the age of 17 from 2013 and from the age of 18 from 2015. We need to do that here.

It has been said that the youth unemployed and NEETS on this island are no different from those in Britain, for example. However, our situation with such young people is behind that in the rest of Europe, and Northern Ireland is even behind that in the South of Ireland. A recent University and College Union study that compared people's qualifications here with those in Britain showed that Northern Ireland lagged behind in GCSEs. The Assembly must look at that issue. Paul Butler concluded by stating that he hoped that the Assembly hears some positive news from the Minister for Employment and Learning.

The Minister for Employment and Learning and Claire McGill (Sinn Fein) summarized the debate.

The Minister for Employment and Learning rather than deliver the speech that he was going to make, he addressed the Members' queries. The issue he noted of caution about the statistics that Members have been quoting. The Assembly must remember that it is not working from the same page, because there are figures for 16- to 18-year-olds, for 16- to 19-year-olds, and for 16- to 24-year-olds. Therefore, there are all sorts of different definitions. The Assembly must get its heads around that and get some statistics that it agrees on. The Minister for Employment and Learning promised to consult his colleagues in the Department for Employment and Learning and

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in Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment, which deals with the labour force surveys on which many of those statistics are based.

The Minister for Employment and Learning pointed out that the figures that the Assembly uses to quantify the people who are not in education, employment and training are in three different categories. The statistics for Northern Ireland do not define and break down those figures in detail. The three categories are: the core figures, which represent those who are permanently in that category; the figures for students who are taking a gap year, which are included even though those students are not formally involved in education, employment or training; and the figures for those who are somewhere in between.

Taking England as an example, the Assembly could see that the figures for the 16- to 19-year-old category are worse than ours, whereas for the 16- to 24-year-old category, they are slightly better. Of those people, roughly 38% are in the core group, 22% are floating or undecided, and 41% are open to learning, on a gap year or waiting for an opportunity to arise. Therefore, there is no single figure that defines all those people.

Sue Ramsey asked whether the Department for Employment and Learning would set a target. Given what has happened over the past year to 18 months, any target that we might have set beforehand will be way off the mark. Again, using the example of England, where a target of 7.6% was set. At present, the figures are 13.4%, having risen from about 10.6%. Therefore, England is at almost double its target figure. There is not much point in setting a target until there is a general position from government.

As a member of the Executive subcommittee on children and young people, the Minister for Employment and Learning can tell Members that co-operation is taking place. The scoping study, to which a number of Members referred, will be coming to the Minister for Employment and Learning early in the new year — next month or shortly thereafter — and it is his intention to examine it to see where the Assembly goes from there and to bring it to the Executive. As

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Members said, the Executive is where all Ministers are. As almost every Department has a role to play in this — the Department of Education, Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure and Department for Social Development are involved — the scoping exercise needs to go to the Executive. Any targets that the Assembly set would have to be incorporated into the Programme for Government. Therefore, it is the Minister for Employment and Learning's intention to bring the paper to the Executive.

The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning raised another matter concerning the Department for Work and Pensions future jobs fund. Resources for the future jobs fund, on the scale required to replicate the GB approach, are not available in the Department for Employment and Learning's budget. However, the Assembly has secured sufficient funds from its own baseline to test the future jobs fund concept in Northern Ireland. If the pilot proves successful, the Department for Employment and Learning will seek funds to offer similar schemes in other parts of Northern Ireland. The Assembly is looking very closely at that, but, at present, it does not have the funds to roll it out.

Tom Buchanan referred to the extremely important role of the voluntary and community sector, and the scoping study has been informed by discussions with that sector. The Department for Employment and Learning has contracts with voluntary and community organisations to deliver its services. Therefore the Department for Employment and Learning is very much focused on that sector.

Pat Ramsey asked about the Steps to Work contract. The Member is aware that that has been an ongoing issue for a long time and that it is a concern to the Minister for Employment and Learning. The contract has been subject to an unavoidable delay arising out of an ongoing dispute involving the proposed service provider, and until that matter is resolved, the Minister for Employment and Learning could not comment any further. The Minister for Employment and Learning was acting on legal advice, and apologised that he could not

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be more open with the Member. However, the dispute must be resolved before the Assembly can move forward.

Overwhelmingly, Members expressed concern for the young people involved. As far as the Minister for Employment and Learning can see, Northern Ireland is no worse off than England, except perhaps if the category were extended to include 16- to 24-year-olds.

According to the Minister for Employment and Learning, if the Assembly takes its position with 16- to 19-year-olds, Northern Ireland is probably slightly better off than the rest of the UK. At a meeting of the North/South Ministerial Council the week before last in Dublin, the Minister for Employment and Learning raised that issue when they were comparing figures. The Republic does not categorise things in the same way as Northern Ireland does. The Department for Employment and Learning has agreed to follow-up on that issue, which it will hopefully do at the next Council meeting in the spring. However, the Department for Employment and Learning recognises that unemployment among young people is a problem that everybody faces.

People ask whether a failure to act has resulted in a lost generation. People have chided the Minister for Employment and Learning about his language, and the Assembly has to be careful about using terms such as “lost generation”, because it is not dealing with a homogenous group of people. There are different groups and, although the figures are staggering, the Assembly is dealing with individuals in each category. Virtually no two people are in the same position. The Assembly has many arbitrary divisions and determinations in Northern Ireland to categorise people.

The Minister for Employment and Learning went on to address Paul Butler’s point. When the Minister for Employment and Learning took on his ministerial post, he was staggered by the levels of literacy in Northern Ireland. He cannot understand how Northern Ireland hopes to succeed with young people if substantial numbers are being transferred from primary to post-primary school when they cannot read. The Minister for Employment and Learning thinks that Basil

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McCrea (UUP) touched on that point. If any co-ordination or strategy is needed around this place, it has to be one to address literacy levels, because people are left stranded if they do not have the basic ability to read and write when they go to post-primary school. Lack of literacy leads to children being isolated, having poor self-esteem and being easily used for negative purposes by elements in the community. Therefore, the Assembly has got to really work at Northern Ireland's literacy levels.

Paul Butler referred to a term that the Minister for Employment and Learning used. The Minister for Employment and Learning was introduced to that term by community workers in west Belfast. It was not the Minister for Employment and Learning's invention and was used as a nickname or as slang to describe a subgroup of people who live certain lives. Such people are out there. The term was not meant as one of abuse; it was used to describe a particular subgroup of people. The Minister for Employment and Learning pointed out that he has been in community politics for 25 years. He has chaired community groups for a number of years, including one in west Belfast, and set up the Greater Shankill Task Force and the West Belfast Task Force. People in the Department for Employment and Learning know that he has made essential skills one of his top priorities, because he was so horrified by what he found when he came into the job. The Minister for Employment and Learning admitted that he had not appreciated the extent of the problem. His remark was nothing to do with people taking benefits. Incidentally, the sensational piece was not written by the journalist who interviewed him, which is not insignificant.

The Minister for Employment and Learning's task and that of the Department for Employment and Learning is finding what they can do. This includes looking at what frameworks can be developed to tackle the problem; what is going to be achieved as an Assembly and as an Executive; are the Assembly going to create the circumstances in which people leave the system in a better way than they were when they went into it.

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The Minister for Employment and Learning visited a number of organisations that the Department for Employment and Learning has contracts with, which deal with people who faced difficult circumstances in care, may have been subject to abuse and may have been involved with substance abuse. A lot of people have not got a clue about what is going on out there. The Assembly can look at the busy city and town centres and the shoppers who pile into them, but they forget that it is the people who are not in them, rather than those who are, who we are worried about, because they are almost invisible in the community. However, the Minister for Employment and Learning stated that they exist, and they are not being dealt with in a way that will enable them to participate. The Minister for Employment and Learning takes those matters extremely seriously, and hopes that the Assembly will make progress early in the new year.

Jim Shannon (DUP) raised the issue of the contribution of further education. The Minister for Employment and Learning is aware of the funding issue to which Jim Shannon refers. It is being dealt with at a high level in the Department for Employment and Learning. The Department for Employment and Learning are discussing that matter with the further education sector, but the Minister for Employment and Learning does not know what the outcome will be. However, the Department for Employment and Learning are aware of the problem, and it is receiving attention. The Minister for Employment and Learning hopes that, before long, he will be able to assess whether he has a way to resolve it correctly.

The colleges have played, and continue to play, a significant role. They have responded quickly and innovatively, and the Department for Employment and Learning has introduced a number of initiatives. Nevertheless, the Minister for Employment and Learning agrees with Members that the issue will only be resolved through collective action by the Departments in Northern Ireland. That will only happen if the Executive agrees to take a decision on whether they intend to prioritise the matter across all Departments. The Department for Employment and Learning and the Department of Education can do so much. However, the total effect would be far more effective through a cross-government position. That is the thrust of what those

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who proposed the motion are trying to achieve. The Minister for Employment and Learning assured that the issue will receive the best and most appropriate attention possible, and he would be surprised if other Ministers do not offer a willing and positive response.

Claire McGill (Sinn Fein) when summing up the debate thanked everyone who contributed to the debate.

She went on to say that during the debate, Members said that the Assembly already debated this topic. That is true; the Assembly are revisiting the issue. However, from listening to contributions this afternoon, it is clear that it is a live issue. As one Member said, it is a challenging and complex issue. Members' contributions were valuable in determining how to make progress on the issue. Repeated mention has been made of the need for a strategy, and Members' arguments on that point are valuable and coherent. If Claire McGill understood correctly, the Minister for Employment and Learning agreed with that assertion.

Claire McGill outlined why Sinn Fein proposed the motion today. Kieran McCarthy (Alliance) mentioned the valuable information pack that Members have, which contains different bits and pieces of media coverage from here and across the water. Although work has been done on the matter across the water, the issue has still not been sorted. Claire McGill noted that the British Prime Minister and others are being challenged at this stage. Early in the debate, David McClarty (UUP) said that this is a persistent problem that has existed for a number of years. Therefore, it has not been sorted. Claire McGill commended the Minister for Employment and Learning on his attempts to rectify that.

Claire McGill read of examples of the gaps that exist in training provision. Recently, in November, the local press in my constituency printed a story about a 22-year-old man from Cookstown who applied to take up an apprenticeship. He got through the aptitude test but was unable to get a placement and had to abandon the course. Claire McGill felt that something was wrong with that, because the programme-led apprenticeships, which were introduced by the

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Minister for Employment and Learning, have been in place for some time. She questioned why someone did not explain the situation to the young man. The article stated that he had gone to the local job centre but could find nothing there. He had phoned round but could not find a placement anywhere.

That young man of 22 years of age is a parent, and he has worked since he was 16 in retail and as a postman. Claire McGill wanted to share that example because it supports Sinn Fein's view, and that of other contributors to the debate, that a strategy should be in place, and it shows that a gap exists. That young man did everything right, but he still could not get into training — not even into a job, but into training. There is something wrong there.

The cost of programme-led apprenticeships was mentioned, and Claire McGill knows that sorting out that problem and providing similar training programmes will not be cheap. They will be expensive, but money has to be invested in them. However, obtaining the resources that would be required to make those programmes a success is an entirely different issue. For example, Claire McGill read the account of the principal of an education provider in Newquay who mentioned the cost of programmes that require intensive tutoring. The Assembly must examine the issue of resources and, in developing a strategy, as was mentioned a number of times in the debate, the Assembly must join up the departmental dots.

The Minister for Employment and Learning said that the Department for Employment and Learning has to get the statistics right. Sue Ramsey mentioned a figure in her opening remarks, and, if that statistic is accurate, it is, as the Minister said, staggering that 47,000 under-25s are not currently in employment, education or training, one way or the other. The Assembly has been talking about a cross-departmental approach, and that is the key to the problem, although some Departments will have more responsibility than others. Members quoted figures in the debate, but, if the Assembly were to give departmental officials a couple of figures and ask them how many under-25s are not in employment, education or training, Claire McGill would be surprised if any of them were to come up with the

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figure of 47,000. Barnardo's is seeking a strategy on this issue, and, having listened to what the Minister said, it is clear that there are strategies in place. However, we have to tie everything together.

Claire McGill wanted to comment on some Members' contributions, although the Minister has, to some extent, already done that. Paul Butler said that the cost of having so many young people who are not in education, training or employment is £250 million a year. He also made a comparison with what is happening in Europe, against which we are not doing that well. He also referred to the problem being cyclical. Everyone accepts that the issue is generational, and we should think about what we can do about that.

Several Members said that education is a key factor and emphasised the need to focus on education much earlier than at the age of 16. We accept that there are problems at earlier stages of education. Sinn Féin and the three Members who tabled the motion have no difficulty in accepting the fact that the problems go back to the early stages of education. Reference was made to an early years strategy, which, I hope, will come to fruition.

However, Claire McGill pointed out that the motion specifically refers to people who are under the age of 25. The three Members who tabled the motion are members of the Committee for Employment and Learning, and none of the Assembly has any difficulty with there being a more coherent approach to the problem. Basil McCrea stated that education is important. The way in which the Assembly deals with young people in bad situations is a problem for society. Those young people may have experienced family breakdowns and associated mental-health problems. The Assembly must consider how to deal with the whole situation. Members must bear in mind that it is not only statistics that we are discussing but individuals, as the Minister said.

Claire McGill concluded by thanking Members for their contributions. She did not refer to all Members because the Minister summed up their contributions.

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The question was put to the Assembly and agreed to. It was resolved “that this Assembly notes that one third of all benefit claimants are now under 25 years old and that one fifth of people aged 16 to 24 are classed as “not in education, employment or training”; welcomes the study on this issue currently being undertaken by the Department for Employment and Learning; and calls on the Minister to bring forward a cross-departmental strategy and programme, in conjunction with Executive colleagues, to prevent these young people becoming a lost generation.”

Private Members’ Business

Foster Care

Jim Shannon (DUP) begged to move “that this Assembly notes the fact that there are not enough foster carers, with 200 long-term carers currently being required and half of carers being of retirement age; further notes that those people who provide foster care do not receive enough support; and asks the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to initiate, as a matter of urgency, a new policy on foster care.”

Jim Shannon stated that some of the statistics gave a cold idea of where Northern Ireland is. On any given day in the UK, 51,000 children live with 43,000 foster families. The shortage of foster carers means that local authorities and health and social care trusts in Northern Ireland are often forced to place children where there is a vacancy, rather than with the foster family that best meets the individual needs of the child. Not having enough foster carers means that children may be forced to change schools and move a long way from family and friends. Indeed, those are the experiences of some of the people whom Jim Shannon represents. Foster carers and children who experience a breakdown in a placement invariably suffer as a consequence. That is a side effect of what happens. Very little has been done in recent years to profile the foster care workforce, and that is something that we have to try to do here today.

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Against that background, the Fostering Network contacted other Members and Jim Shannon to look at the age of current foster carers so that they could identify whether there are any immediate concerns about the future of foster care provision. In March 2009, the Fostering Network analysed a sample of 11,000 of its foster carer members. The results were quite illuminating. They showed that 94% of foster carers are aged 40 and over and that 65% are aged 50 and over. Jim Shannon stated that he is not ageist, especially given that he fits into that category, however, although there is, rightly, no upper age limit for fostering, the figures suggest that a huge proportion of the workforce could choose to retire over the next 10 to 15 years. That is the crux of the matter, and it would be cause for concern in any sector. Therefore, it is crucial that more people of all ages come forward to foster.

The average age of foster carers is rising significantly. According to the most recent comparable study, in 2001 the average age of a female foster carer was 46. Today, it is 53. Over the same period, the average age of male foster carers has risen from 47 to 54. A more recent study that the Fostering Network in Scotland carried out found that only 12% of foster carers were under 40 years of age and that fewer younger foster carers were being recruited. That survey found that only 6% of the current foster care workforce is under 40 years of age. Unless the recruitment of new foster carers of all ages is stepped up sharply, there will be a far higher deficit of foster carers in the near future. It is vital that national and local governments put in place measures to ensure that the shortage of foster carers is not more severe in 10 or 15 years.

Most fostering services succeed in replacing the 10% of the workforce that ceases fostering every year. In that way, they maintain their pool of available foster carers on a year-on-year basis. However, local authorities are struggling to achieve an increase in that pool. Hence, they are not recruiting sufficient foster carers to cope with the potential rise in retirements, so a real problem looms on the horizon.

Some evidence shows that independent fostering providers have been more successful in increasing the supply of foster carers, but

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the overall shortage of foster carers continues. That situation is likely to get worse. There are also specific acute shortages that fostering services are attempting to address. Those include finding foster carers to care for teenagers, either on a short-term or long-term basis, caring for children with disabilities and finding foster carers from some ethnic minority communities.

Furthermore, although many people come to fostering with a range of relevant experiences, it can take several years to develop all the skills that are needed to foster. In the coming decade, as the most experienced foster carers retire, it will become increasingly difficult to find the right foster carers when and where they are needed for children coming into care. That is the crux of the matter.

Although there are no age limits for people who apply to foster, all applicants must attend training courses and undergo a thorough assessment to ensure that they are capable of taking on that demanding job. Jim Shannon knows a number of foster carers who do good work in my constituency, and they have a constructive attitude to building character in the children whom they foster.

Foster caring tends to attract mature individuals, many of whom have experience of working with children or of bringing up their own family. Sometimes, it is good to have that base, but it is not the only basis on which to become a foster parent. The breadth of experience that older foster carers can offer is welcome, and Jim Shannon recognises the value of their knowledge and skills. However, although it is essential that people who are aged 50 and over continue to come forward, fostering now also needs to appeal to the untapped pool of people with relevant skills, qualities and experience who are in their 20s, 30s and 40s, particularly given the increased trend towards long-term fostering, whereby a foster carer might look after the same child or sibling group for up to 15 years or more. Foster carers in their 20s, 30s and 40s are also generally the best-placed group to provide stability to children who need long-term care. Therefore, we must consider that group with respect to long- and short-term fostering.

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Foster care placements can vary from a few days or months to 15 years or more, and we have all heard of such experiences. In 2000, the average placement was for seven years, which accounts for a critical part of any young person's life and helps to build his or her character for adulthood and his or her future place in society. The trend towards long-term fostering means that more foster carers are required to offer a home to children for as much as 15 years or more. In general, people in their 20s, 30s and 40s are best able to meet that need.

Jim Shannon stated that the Assembly needs urgent action to prevent a crisis in foster care, and fostering services must aim to recruit more carers. Jim Shannon went on to outline several ways in which that could happen. Fostering services should review their promotional activity and the age and type of people who are applying to foster, and they must identify any gaps in the recruitment of younger people and the factors that might motivate that group to foster in the future. In other words, Jim Shannon asked how people can be encouraged to take on fostering as a vocation. Fostering services must undertake a full audit of their workforces to assess the potential retirement ages of foster carers and put in place a strategy to replace their expertise before it is lost from the service. The Assembly does not want to lose that experience and ability. Fostering services must make use of foster carers to mentor new recruits and to help them to develop their skills and experience.

To recruit enough foster carers, fostering services must be adequately funded so that all foster carers receive appropriate fees and allowances. People must be able to afford to foster, so an adequate financial package must be in place. The current package needs to be improved.

According to the Assembly must work with fostering services and awarding bodies to develop nationally accredited training courses that are accessible to all foster carers at times and in ways that fit in with and around their working lives. The Assembly must be more flexible about how we do that. A standardised and accredited framework for professional development is also required.

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The Assembly must recognise foster carers as equal partners in the team that surrounds a child. Let us remark on their role and the job that they do. The Assembly must accord foster carers the status and authority that allows them to help children in their care to lead a normal life.

Jim Shannon feels workforce statistics must be made available annually and include a breakdown of demographics such as age, gender, ethnicity and religion as well as the type of foster care that individuals are approved to offer and the length of time that they have been fostering. All those matters are vital when it comes to doing better. Opportunities must be explored through social marketing and other methods to motivate a greater number of people of all ages to consider a career in fostering as well as other roles in the children's workforce.

Unlike in other parts of the UK, in Northern Ireland, fostering services remain unregulated. Indeed, there has been only one inspection of fostering services here since the inception of the NHS in 1948, and that was in the late 1990s. The Assembly needs new legislation to allow the introduction of minimum standards and fostering regulations to monitor and to ensure consistency in service provision across all sectors, whether public, voluntary or private.

Consultation on the draft minimum standards took place at the end of 2004, but, to date, there has been no movement on it. The consultation on the draft regulations closed in November 2008, but there has been no outcome to that either. Jim Shannon knows that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety will refer to that in his response, but he asked him to incorporate it in any review that he implements.

Many statistics were given, but Jim Shannon did not want to forget the main reason why the Assembly are debating the motion: to ensure that children who have had a rough time and who, for one reason or another, have been placed in care have the assistance of people who are equipped to help them and able to provide a stable and happy home life for them. That is important. Those vulnerable

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children need the Assembly's help, and change must happen to enable that help to be provided. Jim Shannon concluded by asking the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to do just that.

During the debate reference was made to children with disabilities and mental health issues.

John McCallister (UUP) stated that although he supported the motion and understood the reasons for it, the Assembly must be careful not to paint a negative picture of foster caring in Northern Ireland.

Fostering is a highly rewarding and worthwhile vocation that makes a real difference to the lives of thousands of young people in Northern Ireland each year. Foster parents make a meaningful contribution not only to the children whom they help but to society at large. Foster parents help to protect and support the most vulnerable in our society, and they should be commended highly for their work. John McCallister felt they should be encouraged at every opportunity, and others should be encouraged to take up the role of foster parents.

John McCallister feels it is true that, over the next three years, the Assembly need to recruit a further 150 to 200 long-term foster carers in Northern Ireland. On any day, around 2,500 children and young people are living with foster carers. In order to provide those children with the highest standard of care, it is important that they are matched with foster carers who can meet their specific needs. It is not the case that any foster carer will do, and therein lie some of the problems. The overwhelming priority for the Department is the welfare of children, and to ensure that welfare we need more foster carers.

The need for improvement should not detract from the progress that has been made and the steps that the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is taking. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has already met his public service agreement, which was to increase the number of foster carers across Northern Ireland by 300 from the 31 March 2006 baseline figure of

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just over 1,500. By December 2008, there were over 1,800 registered foster carers in Northern Ireland. That was achieved through the dedicated work of the Department and many other organisations. The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has taken many steps to recruit new foster carers and to improve the support for those who undertake that work.

The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety has supported and launched recruitment schemes and has introduced a 24-hour, seven-days-a-week support service for foster carers. In November 2007, the regional fostering recruitment and training co-ordination service was set up to support the local trusts in the recruitment, assessment and training of foster carers. A television advertisement campaign and other measures have led to a significant increase in the number of foster carers recruited over the past year. There has been an increase in foster care allowances, and there has been a concerted effort to improve the number of foster carers and the support that they receive. John McCallister hopes that the Members who tabled the motion recognise that fact.

Although the Assembly must always take population size into consideration, the situation in Northern Ireland is comparable to that in the rest of the United Kingdom. There is the need for another 8,200 foster families to provide placement choices in England; Scotland needs another 1,700; Wales needs 750; and Northern Ireland needs almost 200. Therefore, Northern Ireland are not out of step with the rest of the United Kingdom. However, John McCallister accepts, as does the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, that the Assembly needs to continue to build on the progress that has been made.

Children in foster care are some of the most vulnerable in our society. Unfortunately, children in care often face significant hurdles in life, be it educational underachievement or a greater incidence of mental-health issues. There is also a far-reaching need to improve parenting skills and the ability of vulnerable people to look after their children. There is a need to increase the number of people who are willing and

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able to adopt to ensure that children get the permanent support that they need.

John McCallister concluded by expressing his support for the motion, but he encouraged those who proposed it to look at the positive steps that have been taken and to build on them by positively encouraging more people into foster care. Every Member knows that Northern Ireland is entering a period of great fiscal uncertainty and constraint, which will put further pressure on those services. It is of paramount importance that we get people to provide foster care and that we give them the support that they need. In his opening remarks, Jim Shannon referred to the need for financial support, and John McCallister has no doubt that he will encourage the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety and others to provide that support.

Dominic Bradley (SDLP) opened by stating that this was an important motion as it referred to one of the most vulnerable groups in our society: looked-after children.

Dominic Bradley shared that he had the good fortune to have been involved in fostering as a foster carer, and he knows that others in the House have had the same experience. He referred to it as an enriching experience in many ways and is at least mutually beneficial to the foster carers and the children for whom they provide care. He paid tribute to those who are still involved in fostering, stating that Northern Ireland owes them a huge debt.

Dominic Bradley emphasized that fostering is not easy, either for the children, who, through no fault of their own, need to be cared for, or for the carers. Both need all the support that the Assembly can give them to make the fostering experience as beneficial as possible to the children. The policy direction is probably right, but Care Matters needs an implementation plan and to be monitored by the Assembly. Northern Ireland needs sufficient foster carers to provide placement choice, thereby providing more stability for children in care. That, in turn, increases the chance of children having better educational

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outcomes, greater security and attachments to foster carers and better mental and physical health.

It would help if Northern Ireland had a single database of foster carers for all Northern Ireland against which the needs of young people coming into care could be matched. That would be a significant step forward. It would allow for an audit of the current fostering workforce to assess the potential impact of forthcoming requirements and would be helpful in reviewing recruitment activities to ensure that they are appealing to people of all ages. An annual audit of the profile of foster carers is required so that we are clear that a diverse pool of people is recruited to match the needs of children. That is particularly the case for children who require long-term care.

Considerable investment is needed to make the payment of fees to the majority of foster carers a reality. In 2007, Fostering Network estimated that an additional £8 million would be required to fund a payment scheme. There is a clear need for the regulation of fostering services by the implementation of minimum standards. Northern Ireland lags behind the rest of the UK when it comes to the regulation and inspection of foster care. Jim Shannon mentioned that Northern Ireland has had only one inspection of foster services since the inception of the Health Service in 1948. That is alarming; indeed, it is incredible.

Dominic Bradley appreciates the advice that he received from Fostering Network, and the report of its Together for Change campaign outlines the elements of an effective and comprehensive support service. That would include good access to and communications with the child's social worker; regular meetings with the supervising social worker; the availability of peer support; a dedicated fostering-specific out-of-hours service; and other useful proposals. It also outlines a number of important recommendations: government should set standards for the availability of support and ensure that the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority inspects those against standards; government should commission research to evaluate support programmes and ensure effective programmes are rolled out; we need to ensure that support for foster

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care associations and groups is strengthened and that services are inspected for their support for such groups; we need to set standards that define independent support and require that that service is made available to foster carers.

In conclusion, Dominic Bradley stated that foster carers make a huge contribution to the lives of the children whom they foster, and the least that the Assembly can do is provide every possible intervention, support and backup for them.

After further general debate the question was put to the Assembly and agreed to. It was resolved “that this Assembly notes the fact that there are not enough foster carers, with 200 long-term carers currently being required, and half of carers being of retirement age; further notes that those people who provide foster care do not receive enough support; and asks the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to initiate, as a matter of urgency, a new policy on foster care.”

C This Week's Assembly Business

The Assembly is in recess from 12 December 2009 to 3 January 2010. The next Plenary Session is not until 11 January 2010.

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D Written Answers to Questions, Week Ending 11 December 2009

FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Social Security: Earnings Disregard

Paul Maskey (Sinn Fein) asked the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if the Executive Sub-Committee on Children and Young People or the Executive Sub-Committee on Poverty and Social Inclusion have considered a move away from parity with England, Scotland and Wales by setting a higher earnings disregard level than currently exists under social security arrangements. (AQO 504/10)

First Minister and Deputy First Minister: There have been no discussions to date at either of these Sub-Committee's on the issue of earnings disregard levels.

The Minister for Social Development advised that to do so would be a breach of the principle that people in Northern Ireland should receive the same benefit under the same conditions as people in England, Scotland and Wales.

The Executive Sub-Committee on Poverty and Social Inclusion plan to meet before the end of the year to consider a 'Priorities' paper that sets out a number of suggestions for potential areas for further work to go forward in the field of poverty and social inclusion. Any further work will require the support of the relevant Minister/s.

EDUCATION

Middletown Autism Centre

Tom Elliott (UUP) asked the Minister of Education, in light of a change of commitment of the Republic of Ireland Government and the N.I. Executive decision to apply 3% efficiency savings to cross-border initiatives (i) if she has reassessed the viability of the
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Middletown Autism Centre; (ii) if she will now acknowledge that the concept is flawed; (iii) to detail how she intends to fund its capital and revenue budgets; and (iv) to detail how much each element will cost in each of the next three years. (AQW 1418/10)

Minister of Education: The need to maximise efficiency in all public bodies was recognised by the Executive in Budget 2008-2011 and has proved particularly pertinent in the current economic and fiscal climate. It is essential, therefore, that resources are released through efficiencies in the delivery and management of all existing and planned programmes, including North/South initiatives.

The Minister of Education assured the Assembly that she remained committed to the Middletown Centre for Autism (MCA).

The MCA is a pioneering all-Ireland initiative that delivers a range of innovative new services in order to improve the education of children and young people with autistic spectrum disorders in partnership with families and existing statutory and voluntary service providers.

The MCA operates within the terms of a reciprocal funding agreement between the Department of Education (DE) and the Department of Education and Science (DES). In addition, a Management Statement and Financial Memorandum, which has been approved by the Department of Finance and Personnel and signed by DE, DES and the MCA is in place. All funding, both capital and revenue, is predicated on a 50:50 split between DE and DES.

The combined DE and DES 2009/10 budgetary allocation for the MCA is currently £1.3m which includes £42k for capital expenditure. Future years allocations will be decided when MCA has taken into consideration DE and DES requirements as part of the MCA corporate planning process, which is still ongoing.

The MCA was discussed at a North South Ministerial Council Meeting in May 2009, at which the Minister of Education expressed to Minister O'Keefe her disappointment about the decision to pause the DES funding of the capital programme and advised that she was unable to

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accept any cuts in funding to this important project. This decision has meant a pause of the capital programme to build a bespoke Learning Support Centre and refurbish residential accommodation and also a pause in the development of two services.

DES has advised that the outcome of their 2010 estimates process will be known in December 2009.

The Minister of Education strongly believes that the most important focus for the Centre must be on support provided directly to children. The Minister of Education's officials, Middletown staff and the Education and Library Boards are considering, as an interim measure, how they can support children and teachers in schools in the north.

Epilepsy Charities

George Robinson (DUP) asked the Minister of Education to detail any meetings she has held with epilepsy charities in the last 12 months. (AQW 3041/10)

Minister of Education: The Department of Education has undertaken a Review of Special Educational Needs and Inclusion to address a range of issues associated with the current special educational needs framework. The Review aims to ensure that every child and young person who faces a barrier to learning is given a fair and equal chance and is provided with the necessary support as early as possible to help them achieve their full potential.

In the last 12 months, the Minister of Education has not had the opportunity to meet with any epilepsy charities but the Minister of Education stated that if any epilepsy groups/charities would like to meet with the Department's Special Education Needs and Inclusion team, they would be happy to facilitate this.

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Every School a Good School - The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion

Fred Cobain (UUP) asked the Minister of Education what will be the status of existing statements of special educational needs following implementation of the proposed policy 'Every School a Good School - The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion'.
(AQW 3277/10)

Minister of Education: The Department of Education has undertaken a policy review of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Inclusion and issued for consultation, in August 2009, a document setting out high level proposals for public consideration. The formal consultation period will run to 31 January 2010, after which the Department will fully consider the responses received. One of a range of proposals is to introduce a Coordinated Support Plan for children and young people with complex or multiple needs and a Personal Learning Plan for all other SEN children to focus on setting and monitoring outcomes for children, a process which it is considered is not adequately captured in the current system. After all responses to the policy proposals have been fully considered and decisions made on the proposals that are to be taken forward, the necessary lower level detail of the policy will be developed. One matter that will be fully explored in the detailed outworking of the responses is that of the future status of statements of special education needs.

Parents of children and young people with SEN will continued to be able to request an Education and Library Board to undertake a statutory assessment of their child's needs, that might lead to the drafting of a statement of special educational needs, within the existing SEN framework, until any new policy is implemented.

Every School a Good School - The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion

Fred Cobain (UUP) asked e Minister of Education whether children with existing statements of special educational needs will be entitled to an immediate assessment for the new Co-ordinated Support Plan

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following implementation of the proposed policy 'Every School a Good School - The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion'. (AQW 3278/10)

Minister of Education: The Department of Education has undertaken a policy review of Special Educational Needs (SEN) and Inclusion and issued for consultation, in August 2009, a document setting out high level proposals for public consideration. The formal consultation period will run to 31 January 2010, after which the Department will fully consider the responses received. One of a range of proposals is to introduce a Coordinated Support Plan for children and young people with complex or multiple needs to focus on setting and monitoring outcomes for children, a process which it is considered is not adequately captured in the current system. The consultation document also proposes, at a high level, transitional arrangements that would require the Education and Skills Authority, within a period of two years from the operative date of any new framework, to review those children in receipt of a statement and consider whether their needs should be met in future through a Co-ordinated Support Plan. After all responses to the policy proposals have been fully considered and decisions made on the proposals that are to be taken forward, the necessary lower level detail of the policy will be developed, which would include detailed transitional arrangements.

Every School a Good School - The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion

Fred Cobain (UUP) asked the Minister of Education how the delay in the creation of the Education and Skills Authority will affect the implementation of the proposed policy 'Every School a Good School - The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion'. (AQW 3279/10)

Minister of Education: The high level policy proposals contained in Every School a Good School: The Way Forward for Special Educational Needs and Inclusion are currently undergoing formal consultation up to 31 January 2010. Following that, the Department of Education will consider in detail the responses received and the

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issues that have been raised, and complete a report summarising the responses. It will only be at that stage that the detail of the policies to be taken forward can be discussed with stakeholders, agreed and subsequently implemented. This process will necessarily take some time. Therefore given the level of interest in the Review, and the complexity of the issues under consideration, the Minister of Education would not anticipate that the delay in the creation of the Education and Skills Authority will adversely affect the implementation of any agreed policies resulting from the Review.

Statutory Assessments of Special Needs

Dominic Bradley (SDLP) asked the Minister of Education if she has instructed the Education and Library Boards to decrease (i) the number of statutory assessments of special needs; and (ii) the number of statements of special educational needs being issued. (AQW 3387/10)

Minister of Education: The Minister of Education has not instructed the Education and Library Boards to decrease either the number of statutory assessments of special needs or the number of statements of special educational needs being issued.

EMPLOYMENT AND LEARNING

Epilepsy Charities

George Robinson (DUP) asked the Minister for Employment and Learning to detail any meetings he has held with epilepsy charities in the last 12 months. (AQW 3043/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: In his capacity as Minister for Employment and Learning, he has held no meetings with epilepsy charities in the last 12 months, nor has he been invited to meet with any such groups during this period.

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People with Haemophilia

Lord Morrow (DUP) asked the Minister for Employment and Learning what measures are in place to ensure that people with Haemophilia, who are fit to work are given equal employment opportunities. (AQW 3247/10)

Minister for Employment and Learning: The Department for Employment and Learning offers a range of pre-employment and employment programmes to help people access employment. In addition to a range of mainstream programmes, a number of programmes are focused specifically on assisting people with disabilities including Haemophilia.

The particular programme that is appropriate for each individual is discussed and agreed with a Pathways Personal Adviser based in local Jobs and Benefits Offices/Jobcentres across Northern Ireland.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Patients with a Learning Disability or Mental Health Condition

Iris Robinson asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the daily cost of providing 24-hour care for a patient with a learning disability or mental health condition in hospital as compared to a residential care home. (AQW 1832/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The following table shows the estimated daily cost of providing 24 hour care for the specified services;

Service	Estimated average daily cost (£)
Residential Care	69

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(Programme of Care 5 Mental Health)	
Residential Care (Programme of Care 6 Learning Disability)	103
Mental Health Inpatient	238
Learning Disability Inpatient	237

Source: Trust Financial Returns 2007-08

Please note:

The above average unit costs take no account of individual case complexity.

The Mental Health and Learning Disability Inpatient unit costs are weighted averages that have been calculated using costs and activity relating to all relevant services for both adults and children.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Adaptations to Housing Executive Properties

Jim Shannon (DUP) asked the Minister for Social Development if she can explain why adaptations to Housing Executive properties are decreasing despite the increase in the Housing Executive budget. (AQW 2834/10)

Minister for Social Development: The adaptations service is demanded and all housing adaptations are tailored to meet the individual

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needs of each particular applicant and therefore will vary in complexity and cost. The number of adaptations carried out each year does not have a direct correlation to the costs. Such is the variance of the costs of individual adaptations that it is not possible to compare the number of adaptations and associated costs in any one year, against the number of adaptations and total costs of adaptations in another year.

Disabled Facilities Extensions

Alastair Ross (DUP) asked the Minister for Social Development how many applications are currently held for disabled facilities extensions in (i) Larne; (ii) Carrickfergus; and (iii) Newtownabbey. (AQW 3022/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Housing Executive currently hold applications (approvals pending) for the following Disabled Facilities Grants involving extensions;

Larne - 1

Carrickfergus - 0

Newtownabbey - 2

There are also 423 applications in these areas at a preliminary stage and it is not known how many will involve extensions until the Occupational Therapy Service's recommendations are received.

Disabled Facilities Extensions

Alastair Ross (DUP) asked the Minister for Social Development to detail the average waiting time for residents to have disabled facilities extensions carried out in (i) Larne; (ii) Carrickfergus; and (iii) Newtownabbey. (AQW 3023/10)

Minister for Social Development: The average waiting time for carrying out disabled facilities extensions in the Housing Executive's

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District Offices in the above areas (from Occupational Therapist's referral to commencement) are as follows:-

- Larne - 70 weeks
- Carrickfergus - 69 weeks
- Newtownabbey * - 107 weeks.

* This delay was due to the need to agree suitable decant accommodation with a number of tenants requiring adaptation works.

Disabled Facilities Extensions

Alastair Ross (DUP) asked the Minister for Social Development how many people have received disabled facilities extensions in (i) Larne; (ii) Carrickfergus; and (iii) Newtownabbey in each of the last 3 years. (AQW 3024/10)

Minister for Social Development: The table below details the number of disabled facilities extensions completed in each of the last 3 years.

	Larne	Carrickfergus	Newtownabbey
2006/07	12	8	20
2007/08	3	15	17
2008/09	6	9	20

Warm Homes Scheme

Simon Hamilton (DUP) asked the Minister for Social Development (i) how many households have received assistance under the Warm Homes Scheme this financial year to date through (a) insulation; and

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(b) heating interventions; and (ii) how much has been spent to date on the scheme in each local Government district. (AQW 3160/10)

Minister for Social Development: Between 1 April and 30 November 2009, 1,808 insulation installations have been provided and 303 heating interventions have been provided. From 1 April until 30 November £2.3 million has been spent. It is not possible to detail the expenditure by local government district.

Maintenance Schemes

Alex Easton (DUP) asked the Minister for Social Development, given her Department's commitment to spend an extra £20 million on maintenance schemes, to explain why £6 million remains unspent. (AQW 3166/10)

Minister for Social Development: The £20m capital funding for grants allocated in the June Monitoring Round had a strict condition that a further £20m would be released to Egan contractors, for kitchen and refurbishments and other maintenance work, from current resource allocations.

However, existing pressures faced by the Housing Executive maintenance budget means that any additional funding provided to Egan contractors can only be released by reducing other essential maintenance works done by a range of other contractors. Many of these contractors are also reliant on the work they are allocated by the Housing Executive and are already suffering from the economic downturn.

It is the Minister for Social Development's intention that the remainder of the Egan funding will be released later this financial year, but this is dependent on Executive approval of the proposed reallocations included in the December monitoring round submission.

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Housing Executive

Jim Shannon (DUP) asked the Minister for Social Development what the budget was for the Newtownards Housing Executive office area for (i) 2006/07; (ii) 2007/08; (iii) 2008/09; and (iv) 2009/10. (AQW 3186/10)

Minister for Social Development: The information is not available in the format requested as Housing Executive budgets are allocated on the basis of their five administrative areas and not by District Office. However, the table below details the Housing Executive expenditure within its Newtownards District Office area for the period 2006-07 to 2009/10.

Activity	2006-07	2007-08	2008-09	2009-10 to 31 October 2009
	£K	£K	£K	£K
Capital Improvement Work	5,692,000	2,638,000	2,374,000	839,000
Planned Maintenance Work	1,720,000	631,000	1,004,000	1,644,000
Response Maintenance	1,793,000	1,909,000	1,889,000	1,547,000
Private Sector Grants	1,157,000	1,393,000	1,468,000	869,000
Disabled Adaptations	829,000	645,000	635,000	498,000

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Total	11,191,000	7,216,000	7,370,000	5,397,000
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Haemophilia

Lord Morrow (DUP) asked the Minister for Social Development to explain why people diagnosed with haemophilia cannot claim Incapacity Benefit or Disability Living Allowance because they are otherwise healthy, but cannot claim Job Seekers Allowance as they are not deemed fit to be sent for any available work; and if she has considered that this could be deemed discriminatory. (AQW 3242/10)

Minister for Social Development: Incapacity benefit is a non-means tested benefit for people who are unable to work because of sickness or disability and entitlement depends on the effects of sickness or disability on a person's life, not on a particular diagnosis or disability. From October 2008 incapacity benefit was replaced with employment and support allowance which focuses on how people can be helped into work and is based on the effects a condition has on a person's capacity to work rather than simply on diagnosis. Disability living allowance is intended to help severely disabled people with the extra costs arising as a result of their disabilities; entitlement depends on the effects of disability on a person's personal care needs and mobility restrictions, not on a particular diagnosis or disability. There is no bar to people with haemophilia claiming these benefits and a claim for disability living allowance, employment and support allowance or incapacity benefit from a person living with haemophilia will be treated in the same way as claims from those with other medical conditions. Jobseeker's allowance is a benefit specifically for unemployed people and the basic conditions of entitlement for its receipt are that a person should be available for and actively seeking work each week. Regard is given to the circumstances of each individual case and the requirement regarding availability for work can be restricted in light of a person's mental or physical condition. A jobseeker's physical or mental limitations are also taken into consideration in determining whether they have been actively seeking work.

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