

Northern Ireland Assembly Disability Monitor



MONDAY 26 OCTOBER 2009

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

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A Last Week's Assembly

Committee Business

Childcare for Students In Further and Higher Education

Sue Ramsey (Sinn Fein), Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning, begged to move “that this Assembly agrees that widening access to further and higher education is a key priority as outlined in the Programme for Government, and that a significant factor in widening access is the provision of campus-based childcare for students; calls on universities, university colleges and regional colleges to examine options for the provision of on-campus childcare, as a matter of urgency, or to seek to preserve or enhance existing childcare provision; and further calls on the Minister to promote such provision with his Executive colleagues.”

During the debate the Minister for Employment and Learning referred to the the Department for Employment and Learning's efforts to widen access to higher education through a variety of financial incentives. It was noted that in the 2008-09 academic year, the Employment and Learning Department allocated almost £2.5 million to encourage enrolments in higher education from all communities, and £1.4 million went to universities to assist with the cost of providing additional support for students from under-represented groups. A further £342,000 went to higher education institutions to provide disability premiums, and £708,000 was earmarked to support special projects that are aimed at making universities more accessible to young people who have felt excluded from higher education.

It was resolved “that this Assembly agrees that widening access to further and higher education is a key priority as outlined in the Programme for Government, and that a significant factor in widening access is the provision of campus-based childcare for students; calls on universities, university colleges and regional colleges to examine options for the provision of on-campus childcare, as a matter of urgency, or to seek to preserve or enhance existing childcare provision; and further calls on the Minister to promote such provision with his Executive colleagues.”

Education Maintenance Allowance

Sue Ramsey (Sinn Fein), the Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning begged to move, “that this Assembly agrees that restricting the education maintenance allowance (EMA) specifically to those enrolled in schools or colleges is a key factor which inhibits alternative education providers from reaching those young people who have disengaged from mainstream education; calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to make EMA accessible to all young people who comply with the age criterion and are engaged in appropriate provision, whether this is in schools or colleges, or with a recognised alternative provider; and further calls on the Minister to engage with the alternative education providers to establish whether the current attendance criteria regarding EMA are too prescriptive.”

During the debate Thomas Buchanan (DUP), Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning agreed that the EMA falls within the remit of the Department of Education more than that of the Department for Employment and Learning.

According to Thomas Buchanan, many research figures have shown that a person’s income relates to the level of his or her education. In Northern Ireland, an extra year spent in education adds an average of 8% to a male’s earnings and 12% to a female’s earnings. Moreover, statistics show that young people in Northern Ireland who leave school at the age of 16 with fewer than five GCSEs are more likely to be unemployed than those who leave school with more than five GCSEs. Although such findings provide clear evidence of the benefits available to individuals who stay in education, they also point to the fact that any investment in education is more likely to be a sound investment for the Northern Ireland economy. That is why it is so important that the EMA be made accessible to alternative education providers who are seeking to reach the young people who are disengaged from mainstream education.

David Hilditch (DUP) said that people who leave school with fewer than five GCSEs are more likely to become unemployed than those with more than five GCSEs, and he highlighted the complexity of that matter. He said that the extension of EMA would encourage many

more young people back into full-time education and that the application process should be made simpler for potential students. He encouraged the Minister to engage with all alternative education providers, and the Committee agrees with that sentiment.

Robert Coulter stated that the lead Department should be the Department of Education and that DEL played only a small role in EMA. He also asked where the extra finance would come from in such tight economic times if EMA were extended beyond schools and colleges.

Pat Ramsey (SDLP) stated that the education maintenance allowance is a useful, targeted package that encourages and enables young people to remain in education. It sends a strong signal from the state about the importance of education, and it is an investment in all our people, particularly young people, which will pay clear dividends in future.

Pat Ramsey is aware that, in the community sector, the EMA is generally managed by the Department of Education in partnership with DEL, but he is confident that both Ministers will be sympathetic to some of the points raised by my colleague Robert Coulter. He is also confident that they would be sympathetic to the views of the particular group of young people who addressed the Committee and to which we have referred today.

Pat Ramsey recently listened to staff and young people from Include Youth and the Give and Take programme, and I was impressed by their dedication and professionalism. They do valuable work with the young people who have been referred to them, particularly by social services, for a range of reasons. Those young people may have mental health and behavioural problems or be leaving the care system, and they may find that, although they want to pick up on their education, they are unable to cope with the fundamentals of the mainstream education system.

According to Pat Ramsey, those young people are doing their best, because they want to be full and active members of society. They want to develop and contribute, and it is important that they are assisted and encouraged in doing so. The Give and Take programme

gives young people confidence, and it equips them with the foundation skills and, more importantly, the qualifications that can lead them to EMA-level courses.

Pat Ramsey feels it is unfortunate, however, that those young people are unable to avail themselves of the benefits of the EMA. It should be obvious that young people should be educated based on their current level of development, rather than where they should be, based on their age. The level of a course must be appropriate to their needs. It seems reasonable that those and other young people who need support at a similar educational or developmental level should have access to funding under the EMA or a similar funding stream.

Pat Ramsey asked the Minister, along with his counterpart in the Department of Education, to review the workings of the EMA. He believes a cross-departmental approach is required to achieve the objectives of encouraging young people to remain in full-time education and ensuring that they are eligible for the EMA based on courses that are appropriate to their educational needs, no matter what their developmental starting point.

Pat Ramsey referred to the Assembly's discussion about how access to childcare provision encourages mothers to remain in education; the funding of young people is no different. In his opinion the Committee works extremely hard to ensure that everyone has access to employment. However, third-level qualifications are the passport to employment, and those can be made available to vulnerable groups, including isolated young people.

Pat Ramsey stated common sense should prevail. He claimed that the Chairperson was right that the Committee for Employment and Learning was asked to address a particular problem. The Assembly has done so by bringing the motion to the Chamber and asking the Minister for Employment and Learning to contribute to achieving its aims. However, it is also important that he work with his counterpart in the Department of Education. Pat Ramsey emphasized his support for the motion.

Anna Lo spoke about the need to clarify who is entitled to EMA. She suggested that the allowance should be made available to all young people. She went on to say that it should be available not just to those who are attending schools and colleges but to those attending all education providers. Ms Lo also said that four times as many young people from poorer families did not intend to stay on at school. Those are the people who need to receive help, encouragement and support that will have a positive impact on our entire community.

William Irwin spoke about the clear cross-departmental onus and which Department should be the lead Department. He said that students who engage with alternative education providers should receive EMA. He also stated that other education providers who take on young people and seek to get them into education and training should be included in the conditions for EMA and that more young people could be brought into the education and training realm if EMA were made more widely accessible.

Paul Butler accepted that there was an onus on both Ministers on the matter. He said that the motion sought only to address the needs of young people from whom the Committee had taken evidence.

The Minister for Employment and Learning in his response to the debate stated that he was mindful of the need for a joint approach to EMA and explained why it was introduced in the first place. He said that his Department is responsible for students in FE colleges and that only those attendance-based students who undertake 15 guided hours per week qualify for EMA.

The Minister said that provision was being made for 500 young people for whom mainstream schooling was not a realistic option. Furthermore, he indicated that there are forms of support for those not in schools or colleges and highlighted some of the schemes that the Department was involved in either individually or collectively with the Department of Education. Moreover, he acknowledged that, despite all the support that is already available, there were still young people who had not re-engaged with the education sector.

The Minister referred to the policy on qualification for the EMA scheme and how it was important to ensure that any courses were

tailored to fit the needs of the students and allow for flexibility. He talked about the joint review and how we need to ensure that it is delivering value for money. It is an important issue, and we must examine it to ensure that it is delivering value for money. I welcome the fact that the Minister said that he would look closely at the issues raised in the debate.

It was resolved “that this Assembly agrees that restricting the education maintenance allowance (EMA) specifically to those enrolled in schools or colleges is a key factor which inhibits alternative education providers from reaching those young people who have disengaged from mainstream education; calls on the Minister for Employment and Learning to make EMA accessible to all young people who comply with the age criterion and are engaged in appropriate provision, whether this is in schools or colleges, or with a recognised alternative provider; and further calls on the Minister to engage with the alternative education providers to establish whether the current attendance criteria regarding EMA are too prescriptive.”

B This Week's Assembly Business

The Assembly is in Halloween recess until 2 November 2009.

Please see Assembly Monitor dated 9 November 2009.

**C Written Answers to Questions, Week ending 23 October
2009**

OFFICE OF FIRST MINISTER AND DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER

Funding for Blind and Partially Sighted People

Jim Shannon (DUP) asked the First Minister and deputy First Minister if any funding is available to help blind and partially sighted people who live below the poverty line. (AQW 1243/10)

First Minister and Deputy First Minister: Although OFMDFM does not have any available funding to help blind and partially sighted people here, including those below the poverty line, the department has been working closely with RNIB in the implementation of the Vision Strategy.

The department is represented on the Vision Strategy Implementation Group and associated Priority Action Group on Accessibility and Inclusion.

OFMDFM is committed to raising awareness of the barriers affecting blind and visually impaired people through the facilitation of Visual Awareness Training within the department.

The forthcoming Promoting Social Inclusion Disability Report will also contain recommendations that seek to address the range of barriers that face all disabled people and prevent them from participating economically and socially.

Blind People

Jim Shannon (DUP) asked the First Minister and Deputy First Minister if they are aware of the recent Action for Blind People survey that reports that two thirds of blind people face discrimination when seeking employment; and what help they, along with other Departments, can offer to blind and partially sighted people. (AQW 1337/10)

First Minister and Deputy First Minister: With regard to blind people facing discrimination when seeking employment, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 contains measures designed to prevent discrimination against disabled people in employment or when seeking employment. Among these measures is a duty on employers to make "reasonable adjustments" to a policy, practice or procedure related to the working environment. The duty to make reasonable adjustments applies to the recruitment process and during all stages of employment.

OFMDFM is represented on the inter-departmental Vision Strategy Implementation (NI) Group which has been set up to take forward the Vision Strategy. OFMDFM are also represented on the Implementation Groups associated Priority Action Group on Accessibility and Inclusion which is looking at the accessibility of written materials with the aim of ending exclusion in terms of leisure activities and the external environment.

OFMDFM drew attention to the forthcoming Promoting Social Inclusion Disability Report which contains recommendations that seek to address the range of barriers faced by many disabled people in accessing employment opportunities.

The Department for Employment and Learning's (DEL) Disablement Advisory Service (DAS) provides a range of disability employment programmes to meet the needs of people with disabilities including those who are blind or have a visual disability. The particular programme that is appropriate for each individual can be discussed, agreed and accessed through Employment Advisers based in local Jobs and Benefits Offices/Jobcentres. DAS also has a team of Occupational Psychologists to assist Advisers provide their services.

In addition, DEL has two representatives, including the Head of DAS, who sit on the Vision Strategy Implementation (NI) Group and also on its Education and Employment Priority Action Group. The main purpose of this Action group is to obtain equal educational attainment and to maximise access to employment for the blind and visual impaired people.

CULTURE, ARTS AND LEISURE

Events Sponsored by Waterways Ireland

George Savage (UUP) asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to detail (i) the events sponsored by Waterways Ireland in the last financial year; (ii) the cost of these events; (iii) the civil servants, public representatives and elected representatives who were invited; (iv) who attended; and (v) the decision making process for selection of the events. (AQW 1376/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Waterways Ireland promotes recreation on the inland waterways through a range of activities including a Sponsorship Programme and through Joint Activities. Joint Activities are developed in partnership with other organisations such as the Waterways Ireland Riverfest supported by Waterways Ireland in conjunction with the local organising committee, Coleraine Borough Council and the Lower Bann Partnership. Including giving information about the costs and activities that were carried out during 2008, the Minister looked at the criteria for applying for sponsorship:

Criteria for Application for Sponsorship

Applications are assessed according to the following criteria and assigned a score with sponsorship funding assigned to the highest scoring Events. Only Events which meet the essential criteria will be considered.

ESSENTIAL CRITERIA

The Event must:

1. Be water-based or a waterside activity on one or more of the seven waterways under the remit of Waterways Ireland;
2. Attract new waterway users in an active capacity and not just as spectators;
3. Be consistent with a sustained balanced use of the waterways with due regard for the environment, ecology, natural and built heritage and biodiversity of the waterways;
4. Apply for and receive event approval from the Waterways Ireland Inspector of Navigation. (This is to ensure that the Event is in compliance with the bye-laws and other navigation

- considerations. See attached for the "Application for Approval of an Event" form which should be completed and submitted with the Sponsorship Application); and
5. Have public liability insurance and insurance which indemnifies Waterways Ireland against claim. See attached for the "Insurance Confirmation Form" which should be completed by your Insurance Company and submitted with the Sponsorship Application.

DESIRABLE CRITERIA

Equality of Access

There should be equal access of participation in the Event for groups highlighted under the Waterways Ireland Equality Scheme, which provides equality for people regardless of:

Age
Political Opinion
Dependents
Race
Disability
Religious Belief
Gender
Sexual Orientation
Marital Status
Member of the Traveller Community

Cross Border Participation

As a North/South Implementation Body, Waterways Ireland promotes cross-border participation in events on the waterways, i.e., involvement of competitors/spectators from Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland at the same Event.

Development of non-established Events

Where possible, funding will be assigned to assist with the development of new Events which provide additional opportunities to attract more users to the waterways.

EDUCATION

Working Groups

Mervyn Storey (DUP) asked the Minister of Education to detail the number and type of working groups currently carrying out work on behalf of her Department. (AQW 550/10)

Minister of Education: There are twenty seven working groups currently carrying out work on behalf of the Department of Education. Those related to people with disabilities include:

Autism Spectrum Disorder Conference Planning Group

This group is co-led with the Department for Education and Science and is tasked with organising an All-Ireland conference on Autism Spectrum Disorder to take place in Armagh in November 2009.

Sub-Group of Ministerial Sub-Committee on Children & Young People

This group considers provision for children with special educational needs in mainstream and special schools including transition to adulthood and the provision of health and social care intervention.

Middletown Centre for Autism Building Integrated Project Team

This group is co-led with the Department for Education and Science and is representative of those involved in the project to design and build the Middletown Centre for Autism. This includes Architects, Engineers, Surveyors and officials from both the Department of Education in the north and the Department for Education and Science in the south.

Community Use of School Premises Working Group

An informal working group made up of key educational stakeholders co-ordinated by CCMS which was established to explore how best to achieve the increased use of school premises by the wider community.

Pupils' Emotional Health and Wellbeing Programme

Programme being developed by key stakeholders and interested parties.

It will focus on the post primary sector and be expected to address how a pupil's emotional health and wellbeing is promoted by the school, what support systems are available to support a pupil under stress and what support is available to a school in the event of a crisis.

Sharing In Education Programme Team

Reviews and makes recommendations for support on education-related applications to the International Fund for Ireland as part of the Department's role as managing agent.

Steering Group for the Review of SEN and Inclusion

Advising the Department on matters connected with review policy proposals.

Steering Group of the Update of the Multiple Deprivation Group This group steers the update of the 2005 measures of spatial deprivation in the north of Ireland and the responses to the recommendations noted in the 2005 Multiple Deprivation Measure report. It quality assures the research and the effective dissemination, briefing and presentation of the research.

Data and Research Advisory Sub-Group of the Obesity Prevention Steering Group One of four Advisory Groups established to take forward the Fit Futures Implementation Plan, designed to address childhood obesity. Its function is to advise, comment and provide formative feedback to the Obesity Prevention Steering Group on the Fit Futures Implementation and on those relevant issues related to the key activities assigned. Membership of the group includes representatives from DHSSPS, DE, DCAL, Food Safety Promotion Board, Food Standards Agency, Health Promotion Agency.

DE/NIO longitudinal research study on young men Research into the transition of young males in post-primary education across a five year

time frame. It focuses on their experiences in terms of education, of violence and factors that affect mental, emotional and physical health and self-esteem.

STEM Subjects

Dominic Bradley (SDLP) asked the Minister of Education why £0.8 million for STEM subjects in specialist schools was surrendered to the Department of Finance and Personnel. (AQW 863/10)

Minister of Education: The £0.8 million funding surrendered to the Department of Finance and Personnel was capital funding which had been made available under the Innovation Fund. This funding, which was confirmed in January 2008, could only be used to support capital projects related to STEM-specialist schools in line with the original intentions of the bid. Since this funding was secured and in the context of wider budget considerations I decided that the schools designated from September 2009 would be the last to be designated as specialist schools under the current model. This changed policy context and shortened timescale meant that further capital investment would not have represented value for money. Any funding secured from the Innovation Fund cannot be transferred either to other areas of activity within DE nor indeed to other measures within our STEM programme. As a result, and in line with current budgeting rules, any surpluses in funding must be surrendered to DFP at the earliest opportunity for reallocation. This funding was surrendered to DFP in the September monitoring round.

Good Mental Health

Lord Morrow (DUP) asked the Minister of Education what plans she has to promote good mental health in children under the school health curriculum. (AQW 946/10)

Minister of Education: The Minister believes strongly in supporting children and young people in succeeding at school and in preparing for life and work. The revised curriculum, which is now in place in all year groups in all grant aided schools, has a very clear focus on raising standards in literacy and numeracy and on delivering a broad and balanced education that can stimulate and excite all young people. It has a very clear focus on developing skills as well as

knowledge – including the skills that young people need to make healthy choices, to build self-confidence and self-esteem and to build constructive relationships.

According to the Minister personal development is an integral part of the revised curriculum, from primary level onwards. It supports our young people in better understanding mental health problems, including causes, prevention, and developing strategies to deal with any problems they, or someone they know, experience throughout their lives.

In addition the Department of Education is in the process of developing a Pupils' Emotional Health and Wellbeing Programme, initially to focus on the post primary sector. The Programme will address how a pupil's emotional health and wellbeing is promoted by the school, both through the curriculum and all other school activity, what support systems are available to support a pupil under stress and what support is available to a school in the event of a crisis.

The Programme will contribute to the building of resilient emotional health and well being of pupils. Emotional wellbeing is critical in developing a healthy successful school community including developing a pupil's social, emotional and behavioural skills. It links with all non academic/curriculum matters affecting pupils such as Counselling, pastoral care, suicide prevention, anti bullying policy, discipline and healthy schools. It is intended to be a vehicle for providing the "glue" to link these individual policies/ services together in a consistent and coherent way. The outcomes from this work are expected during 2010.

Behavioural Issues

Lord Morrow (DUP) asked the Minister of Education (i) how many children are currently in specialised units because of behavioural issues having been removed from mainstream schools; and (ii) what support is in place for these children when they return. (AQW 1279/10)

Minister of Education: The Education and Library Boards advise that some 474 children aged 14 or below are currently attending specialised units because of behavioural issues. Some of these

young people are attending the units on a part-time basis and the expectation is that most will be reintegrated into mainstream school in due course. Pupils aged above 14 years are unlikely to return to mainstream school.

When a pupil returns to school, support is available in the form of outreach from the unit attended, peripatetic teacher support, as well as expertise from Curriculum Advisory and Support Service, Education Psychology Service, the Education Welfare Service and the Behaviour Support Team within each Board area.

The intensity and duration of the support available for children returning to mainstream school will depend on progress and need and also on the support already available in the school. A multi-agency support team which may involve the school, the pupils' parents, Board officers and a number of other professionals will produce a behaviour management plan and determine the level of support, if any, required. Support can include phased reintegration packages including additional resources such as the use of specialist Outreach Behaviour Support teachers, individual tutors and behaviour support assistants. In some instances the support will remain with the reintegrated pupil for some time.

Primary School Federation

Dominic Bradley (SDLP) asked the Minister of Education what her Department considers to be necessary for the formation of (i) a viable two-school primary federation; and (ii) a viable three-school primary federation, in relation to (a) enrolments; (b) minimum intake per year group; (c) travel-to-school distances; (d) distances between individual sites; and (e) teacher numbers. (AQW 1429/10)

Minister of Education: The Department of Education's Sustainable Schools Policy, published in January 2009, defines a set of six criteria to be used in considering the viability of schools as follows:-

- Quality Educational Experience
- Stable Enrolment Trends
- Sound Financial Position

- Strong Leadership and Management
- Accessibility
- Strong Links with the Community.

The quality of education provided will be the overriding consideration.

The policy recognises that existing small schools may work together to meet local need. This may be through federation, where small schools on separate sites come together to form a single school. Such proposals would be considered on a case-by-case basis against the range of criteria and indicators set out in the policy, taking account of individual local circumstances.

Statemented Process

Thomas Buchanan (DUP) asked the Minister of Education to outline the process for getting a child statemented and how long this takes. (AQW 1467/10)

Minister of Education: The statementing process may be initiated by an Education and Library Board or at the request of a parent or the child's school. The process is set out in the Code of Practice on the Identification and Assessment of Special Educational Needs and the Supplement to the Code. These may be accessed at www.deni.gov.uk.

The time scale for conducting a statutory assessment is set out in the Education (Special Educational Needs) Regulations (NI) 2005, which may also be accessed at www.deni.gov.uk. From the date that the Board notifies the parent that it is considering making an assessment or from the date that a request to carry out an assessment is received from the parent or school the Board has 6 weeks, subject to certain statutory exceptions when it may be impractical to meet the 6 week timescale, in which to decide whether to carry out a statutory assessment.

If the Board decides to carry out a statutory assessment it has 10 weeks, again subject to certain statutory exceptions when it may be impractical to meet the 10 week timescale, from the date on which it notifies the parent to complete the assessment. On completion of the

assessment the Board has 2 weeks to issue a proposed statement of special educational needs or to inform the parent that it does not propose to make a statement.

The Board has a further 8 weeks from the date on which it served the proposed statement on the parent in to issue the final statement, making a total of 26 weeks in which to complete the statementing process.

Autism Spectrum Disorders

Carmel Hanna (SDLP) asked the Minister of Education if she has any plans to introduce training for teachers and classroom assistants in dealing with children affected by Autism spectrum disorders. (AQW 1474/10)

Minister of Education: The provision of annual programmes of basic and more advanced training on autistic spectrum disorders (ASDs) for teachers and classroom assistants in all schools is a strategic objective of the Inter-Board ASD Group.

An annual programme of training for teachers and classroom assistants is delivered through the ASD Services in each Education and Library Board (ELB), and the high volume, well attended courses have been positively evaluated. These include training in ASD awareness, promoting positive behaviour, promoting communication, autism and sensory issues, transition planning, encouraging social skills and practical strategies for pupils with ASD. As a result of this training, a large proportion of children with ASD are supported by their own teachers and assistants without the need for intervention by the ASD Service.

In addition, and to complement the ELB training, the Middletown Centre for Autism has developed a comprehensive programme of training encompassing a wide range of specialist topics related to autism spectrum disorders. The training commenced in November 2007 and since then 1501 education professionals including teachers, classroom assistants and educational psychologists have attended training delivered by the Centre.

In the current academic year from August until 22nd October 2009, 571 professionals and parents will have been trained by the Centre. This includes 259 teachers and 187 classroom assistants.

The Centre has a full and varied training prospectus for 2009-2010 with all training specifically targeted towards teachers and classroom assistants working with children and young people on the autism spectrum. In addition, accredited training programmes are to be developed for both teachers and classroom assistants.

HEALTH, SOCIAL SERVICES AND PUBLIC SAFETY

Registered Blind

Jim Shannon (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people have been registered as blind in the age groups (i) 18 and under; (ii) 19-30; (iii) 31-50; and (iv) 50 and over, in each of the last three years. (AQW 1215/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of people registered as blind is not collected centrally, but is recorded by each Health & Social Care. The information provided by the five HSC Trusts is detailed in the table below.

Number of Persons who became Registered as Blind in each of the last 3 years by Age Group (2006 - 2009) 1

| Age Group | 2006/2007 | 2007/2008 | 2008/2009 |
|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| Under 18 | 8 | 8 | 6 |
| Aged 19 - 30 | 14 | 9 | 8 |
| Aged 31 - 50 | 33 | 26 | 24 |
| Aged 50 & over | 253 | 247 | 273 |
| Northern Ireland | 308 | 290 | 311 |

1 A year refers to the period 1st April to 31st March.

Action for Blind People

Jim Shannon (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in light of the Action for Blind People survey which states that two thirds of blind people face discrimination when seeking employment, what help does his Department offer to blind and partially sighted people. (AQW 1216/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: People with visual impairment, including those who are blind and partially sighted, receive a comprehensive assessment of their needs. This assessment, which is undertaken by a multidisciplinary team, focuses on the social, emotional, and practical needs of people who have been diagnosed as blind or partially sighted. Service users are signposted to other organisations and agencies, who can provide support in areas such as training and employment.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is represented on the inter-departmental, inter-agency Vision Strategy Implementation (Northern Ireland) Group to implement the UK Vision Strategy in Northern Ireland. One of its key priorities is to maximise employment for blind and partially sighted people. In addition, the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is developing a Physical and Sensory Disability Strategy which is expected to be issued for consultation in early 2010. The Strategy will complement existing strategies and partnerships and aim to improve the health and well being of all people including those with sensory disabilities in Northern Ireland. Blind and partially sighted people will be engaged during this process.

Dystonia

Jim Shannon (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, pursuant to AQW 8613/09 and AQW 8590/09, (i) if he is aware of the condition 'dystonia'; and (ii) when he expects figures relating to the condition to become available. (AQW 1217/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Minister is aware of the neurological condition Dystonia. There were

176 admissions to Health and Social Care hospitals in Northern Ireland during 2007/08, which is the latest year for which information is available, where Dystonia was recorded as the primary diagnosis.

Funding for Blind and Partially Sighted People

Jim Shannon (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety if any funding is available to help blind and partially sighted people who live below the poverty line. (AQW 1241/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Where a patient with a visual impairment declares that they have financial pressures, the Health and Social Care Trusts make referrals, as appropriate, to the Social Security Agency, Citizens Advice Bureau, Independent Advice Centres, or to the Northern Ireland Housing Executive. Trust staff actively encourage, signpost, and support service users with a visual impairment to apply for benefits or to confirm that they are in receipt of all the benefits to which they may be entitled.

Northern Ireland Attention Deficit Disorder Support Centre

Willie Clarke (Sinn Fein) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures he has taken to ensure payment is made to Northern Ireland -Attention Deficit Disorder Support Centre for services provided to the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 1289/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: It is for the Northern Ireland - Attention Deficit Disorder Support Centre to promote its services to Health and Social Care Trusts and enter into formal contracts with them for the delivery of its services. I understand that talks are ongoing between the Belfast Trust and NI-ADD.

Services for People affected by AD/HD

Willie Clarke (Sinn Fein) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) what measures the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust will take to provide alternative services for children, adults and families of those people affected by AD/HD, if NI-ADD is forced to withdraw its service; and (ii) if the Belfast Health and Social Care

Trust guarantee that any proposed alternative will be to the same standard as that provided by NI-ADD. (AQW 1290/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Statutory services for younger children with ADHD are provided by community paediatric clinics and for older children by Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services. These services are subject to normal governance arrangements.

NI-ADD

Willie Clarke (Sinn Fein) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what measures will be taken to provide alternative services in the South Eastern and Northern Trust areas if NI-ADD is unable to provide the contracted service due to the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust's non-payment. (AQW 1291/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Statutory services for younger children with ADHD are provided by community paediatric clinics and for older children by Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services.

Physiotherapy Appointments

John O'Dowd (Sinn Fein) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety the average waiting time for non-emergency physiotherapy appointments in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust. (AQW 1321/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the average waiting time for non-emergency physiotherapy appointments in the Southern Health and Social Care Trust is not available.

M.E.

Thomas Buchanan (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety who made the decision to stop accepting referrals to the M.E. clinic at Belfast City Hospital. (AQW 1323/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The decision to stop accepting referrals was taken by the Belfast Trust.

Specialist M.E. Facilities

Thomas Buchanan (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail all Health Service specialist M.E. facilities. (AQW 1324/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Minister referred the member to the answer given to AQW 1059/10 on the 15 October 2009.

In AQW 1059/10 Thomas Buchanan asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what services are available for patients diagnosed with M.E in each Health and Social Care Trust.

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Minister advised that each Trust area care for the vast majority of patients with M.E or Chronic Fatigue Syndrome is provided and coordinated by GPs. There is a range of treatment and support options available in Northern Ireland including community care and support, specialist regional neurology services and mental health services. Patients may also be referred to specialists outside Northern Ireland where this is considered clinically appropriate.

M.E

Thomas Buchanan (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people diagnosed with M.E. are currently waiting to see a consultant. (AQW 1325/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the number of people diagnosed with M.E. who are currently waiting to see a consultant is not available.

M.E

Thomas Buchanan (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what is the average waiting time for people diagnosed with M.E. to see a consultant. (AQW 1326/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Information on the average waiting time for people diagnosed with M.E. to see a consultant is not available.

Occupational Therapist Posts

Thomas Buchanan (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many occupational therapist posts are funded by his Department. (AQW 1327/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety does not fund posts.

M.E.

Iris Robinson (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how much it would cost his Department to send all 7000 people diagnosed with M.E. to the UK mainland for treatment. (AQW 1368/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Over the last five years only two patients have been referred to the UK mainland for treatment. Given this limited base it would not be meaningful to estimate an accurate total cost for sending all patients diagnosed with ME to the UK mainland.

M.E.

Iris Robinson (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) how many M.E. patients have been referred to the UK mainland for specialist treatment in each of the last five years; and (ii) what was the cost of these referrals.(AQW 1370/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: 2 patients were referred to the UK mainland for treatment of M.E. in the last five years.

The total cost of these referrals amounted to £3,753.

M.E.

Iris Robinson (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline the training and instruction students at Queen's University Medical School receive in diagnosing and treating M.E. (AQW 1371/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Medical undergraduate students are taught about ME as part of the components of a range of clinical modules in years 3 – 5 of their education.

M.E.

Iris Robinson (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what action his Department is taking to help doctors and therapists develop the specialist knowledge required to diagnose and treat patients with M.E. (AQW 1372/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: ME is covered during years 3–5 of the medical undergraduate degree at QUB. Training is included in the Royal College of General Practitioners curriculum for GP training.

Specialist knowledge may be gained by attendance at annual conferences or in-house profession-specific training provided by each Trust.

Autistic Spectrum Disorder Strategic Action Plan

Iris Robinson (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to list the agencies referred to, and included in, the formulation of the Autistic Spectrum Disorder Strategic Action Plan. (AQW 1373/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Public consultation on the ASD Strategic Action Plan ran from September to December 2008. Over 450 consultation responses were received. Officials also met face to face with a range of stakeholders, including individuals affected by ASD, Government Departments, and voluntary and community organisations.

A comprehensive list of organisations involved or referred to is available in the ASD Strategic Action Plan Consultation Response Document available on the DHSSPS website at www.dhsspsni.gov.uk/index/consultations/previous_consultations.htm

M.E.

Thomas Buchanan (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to detail the cost of the M.E. clinic in Belfast City Hospital, for each of the last three years. (AQW 1378/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The full cost of providing the ME clinic is not available. Belfast Trust has advised that the clinic at Belfast City Hospital was being provided on a voluntary basis by a consultant with a special interest in ME.

Diabetes

Thomas Buchanan (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety how many people are currently registered as diabetic in each Health and Social Care Trust area. (AQW 1380/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: Under the Quality & Outcomes Framework (QOF) of the General Medical Services contract, the total number of GP-registered patients aged 17 and over with diabetes mellitus is recorded. Table 1 shows the total number of people on the QOF diabetes register by Health and Social Care Trust, as at 31 March 2009.

Table 1: Number of patients on Diabetes Register (aged 17 and over)

| Health and Social Care Trust¹ | Number of patients on Diabetes Register (aged 17 and over) |
|---|---|
| Belfast | 15,073 |
| South Eastern | 11,665 |
| Northern | 15,954 |
| Southern | 11,574 |
| Western | 10,800 |

| | |
|---------------------|--------|
| Northern Ireland | 65,066 |
|---------------------|--------|

Source: Payment Calculation and Analysis System (PCAS) at 31 March 2009.

1The Diabetes Register does not include patients' home address so patients have been assigned to Trust areas on the basis of the location of the GP practice at which they are registered rather than the patients' area of residence.

Obesity

Adrian McQuillan (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (i) if his Department recognises obesity as a major health issue; and (ii) what his Department is doing to address the needs of obese patients. (AQW 1389/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: My Department has recognised obesity as a major issue and has allocated additional resources for the implementation of Fit Futures. The GMS contract also provides for the early detection and follow-up of patients with a BMI of over 30. The Department is also currently leading on the development of a cross-departmental Obesity Prevention Strategic Framework which will build on the recommendations contained within Fit Futures.

Obesity

Adrian McQuillan (DUP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety why there is no dedicated obesity service, given that the impact of obesity on life expectancy is comparable to that of smoking, hypertension and high cholesterol. (AQW 1390/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: At present the Health and Social Care Board does not commission a comprehensive bariatric surgical service in Northern Ireland. However, the Regional Medical Services Group (RMSG) has been considering whether a dedicated bariatric service, including surgery, should be established. On RMSG's recommendation, the Board has agreed to fund and carry out a limited pilot through which bariatric surgery for up to 150

suitable patients will be made available. The pilot is open for referrals from May to December 2009.

The Department is also leading on the development of a cross-departmental Obesity Prevention Strategic Framework which will set out a range of short, medium and long term outcomes to prevent obesity across the life course.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Carmel Hanna (SDLP) asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what support is available for people diagnosed Autism Spectrum Disorder and their families in the Derry area, particularly for adults affected by the condition. (AQW 1493/10)

Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety: The Western Health and Social Care Trust has commissioned a range of voluntary organisations to provide services for both adults and children diagnosed with Autism. These include Autism Initiatives, Autism NI and the Cedar Foundation.

The services commissioned include support and social training; daily living skills training; provision of support groups, and a transition service to assist young people move from secondary education to further/higher education, employment/vocational training and into community services.

In addition the Trust works in partnership with other agencies such as the National Autistic Society and PEAT.

REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Public Transport: People with Disabilities

Dominic Bradley (SDLP) asked the Minister for Regional Development to outline the steps his Department is taking to improve access to public transport for people with disabilities. (AQO 254/10)

Minister for Regional Development: The Department for Regional Development is taking forward improvements to the accessibility of public transport through the Accessible Transport Strategy (ATS). This strategy seeks to address the wide ranging barriers that impede use of the transport system by older people and people with disabilities and is being implemented through a series of action plans which contain measures to eliminate or reduce those barriers. Public consultation on the most recent draft action plan for the period 2009-2012 has recently been completed and it is anticipated that this will be published towards the end of the year.

SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Incapacity Benefit Branch

George Savage (UUP) asked the Minister for Social Development (i) for her assessment of the effectiveness of the Incapacity Benefit Branch (IBB); (ii) whether IBB is fit for purpose; and (iii) how often it has attained its Key Performance Indicator targets. (AQW 1125/10)

Minister for Social Development: (i) & (ii) Incapacity Benefit Branch is responsible for the administration of Incapacity Benefit, Incapacity Benefit in Youth, Severe Disablement Allowance and Maternity Allowance. The Branch achieved the Incapacity Benefit Public Service Agreement (PSA) target for financial accuracy within the accepted 1% tolerance in the 2007 year and achieved the target in the 2008 year. In 2009 the Branch continues to perform well against the PSA target, however, final figures are not yet available as monitoring for this year is not complete. Following the introduction of Employment and Support Allowance there is no longer a PSA target set for claim clearance times, however, the Branch met the PSA target in the previous 3 years. Incapacity Benefit Branch's performance against the challenging PSA targets demonstrates the Branch's effectiveness and supports the view that it is fit for purpose. (iii) The table below shows Incapacity Benefit Branch performance against the Public Service Agreement targets set for accuracy and claims clearance:

Financial Accuracy

| IB | 20062007 2008 | 2009* |
|----------------------------|--------------------------|--------------|
| Accuracy Target | 99%99% 99% | 99% |
| Achieved | 97.7%98.9% 99.1% | 98.6% |

*From April 08 – March 09

Clearance Times

| IB | 2006/2007 | 2007/2008 | 2008/09 |
|--|------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Claims Clearance Target | 23 22 | | 22 |
| Achieved | 22.2 19.8 | | 21.3 |

*From April 08 – March 09

Volunteer Development Agency

Mark Durkan (SDLP) asked the Minister for Social Development if funding has been allocated by her Department to the Volunteer Development Agency for the merger of volunteer centres. (AQW 1659/10)

Minister for Social Development: The Department for Social Development has agreed to fund the Volunteer Development Agency in their work with 11 volunteer centres towards merger and modernisation. These autonomous organisations have decided to come together to pool their resources and reduce duplication of activities.

REVISED WRITTEN ANSWERS

Pat Ramsey (SDLP) asked the Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure to list all the receptions he has hosted since taking up office. (AQO 270/10)

Minister of Culture, Arts and Leisure: Since taking up office on 1st of July the Minister has hosted 5 receptions:

- i. On 10 July the Minister welcomed delegates of worldwide Imperial Orange Councils to Stormont. Delegates attended from across the globe for the 43rd Triennial Conference;
- ii. On 22 July 2009 the Minister joined with competitors and guests at a reception in Stormont to send my best wishes to the Northern Ireland Team travelling to the 2009 World Police and Fire Games in Vancouver;
- iii. The Minister hosted a reception in the Marriott Pinnacle Hotel, Downtown Vancouver on Friday 31 July for the Northern Ireland Team competing in the 2009 World Police and Fire Games in Vancouver;
- iv. On 27 July 2009 I welcomed competitors in the 5th World Dwarf Games to Belfast. I met with the President of the Dwarf Athletic Association UK (DAAUK) and competitors from across the world taking part in the Games, a major international event in the Paralympic calendar;
- v. On 10 August 2009 I hosted a reception for Tony McCoy at Parliament Buildings where family and friends joined with the horse racing fraternity in celebrating his achievements.