

## **ORAL AQO 141/10**

**DATE FOR ANSWER: Monday 5<sup>th</sup> October 2009**

**Mr J Dallat (East Londonderry):** To ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister, in light of the statement given to the OFMDFM Committee in November 2008 that “the child poverty Sub-group had identified several departmental initiatives that are in place to tackle child poverty”, to outline how many of these initiatives have been implemented or reviewed to deal with the increased number of children who are now in poverty.

### **1. DSD Initiatives**

#### **Benefit uptake**

- In June 2009 the Social Security Agency’s 2009/10 Benefit uptake Programme was launched to increase awareness of social security agency benefits. Families have been targeted since 2007/08 and in this year’s programme 3,500 families will be contracted to make sure they are not missing out on benefits.
- The Programme has resulted, to date, in an additional £27 million of benefit paid to the most vulnerable in our society; nearly £4 million to families. When carrying out a comprehensive assessment with a client, the advice sector includes eligibility for all social security benefits, Housing Benefit/Rate Relief and the Warm Homes Scheme. They also offer clients additional information/advice on such issues as debt and wills.

#### **Neighbourhood Renewal**

- The Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy was launched in 2003 to address directly the underlying causes of deprivation in Northern Ireland's most disadvantaged communities. In 2003/04 the percentage of children defined as 'living in poverty' in Neighbourhood Renewal Areas was approximately twice the

Northern Ireland level. Breaking the inter-generational cycle of deprivation and consequently reducing levels of child poverty is a long-term objective of the Strategy. This is also a priority of the Executive's 'Lifetimes Opportunities' Strategy.

- In pursuance of this objective Neighbourhood Renewal, through its three Development Offices, has directly supported a range of interventions designed to remove barriers to work for parents and improve the educational outcomes of children and young people. These include; affordable childcare, Lifestart and Family Support projects, educational interventions and skills and employability enhancement programmes.
- Action plans are reviewed on an ongoing basis when priorities for Neighbourhood Renewal Areas are identified or changed.

### **Warm Homes**

- The Warm Homes Scheme is DSD's main programme in tackling fuel poverty. The Scheme has been extremely successful and hugely popular. Since 2001, over £118 million has been spent on the Warm Homes Scheme making over 71,000 homes warmer. The Scheme was subject to a Northern Ireland Audit Office review and subsequent Public Accounts Committee hearing and, following a series of recommendations changes were made to ensure that resources are targeted at those people most in need of help to improve the energy efficiency of their homes. For the first time (from July 2009) young families in receipt of Working Tax Credits can now benefit from improvements to the heating systems in their homes.

## **2. DEL Initiatives**

- **Pathways to Work**

**Pathways to Work** and its associated Condition Management Programme has been rolled out to all Jobs & Benefits offices/JobCentres and assists those in receipt of Incapacity Benefit to return to work contributes to the departments overall target of work placements.

- **Lone Parents Initiatives**

**Financial Incentives for Lone Parents to Return to Work.** From December 2008 2 financial incentives are available throughout Northern Ireland to encourage Lone Parents to return to work. These are -a “Return to Work” credit of £40 per week (non- taxable) for ( a maximum of ) 52 weeks targeted at lone parents who moved into paid employment( including self employment) of at least 16 hours a week who have been claiming benefit for 13 weeks or more; and, an in work emergency fund of up to £300 to assist Lone Parents meet unexpected costs during the first 60 days of their employment.

- **LEMIS**

**The Local Employment Intermediary Service (LEMIS)** was introduced in April 2007 following the end of the ‘Targeted Initiatives’ and ‘Local Intermediary Service’ pilots, LEMIS is a community-based job-focused measure providing on-the-ground assistance to severely disadvantaged clients. The Service aims to help participants identify, address and overcome hurdles in the way of them finding and keeping a job. LEMIS is available in Belfast, Londonderry and Strabane (areas of multiple deprivation identified by the Noble Indices) and complements, but is independent of, the statutory employment services.

During the past 2.5 years 3,779 people have availed of the service and of this number 858 clients (23%) have found employment. Over 70% of participants finding work sustained their employment for 13 weeks. An additional 18 clients moved into employment, less than 16 hours and a further 94 clients progressed on to other DEL programmes.

- **Steps to Work**

**Steps to Work initiative** replaced New Deal in September 2008 as the Department's main adult return to work programme. Its aim is to assist people who are unemployed or economically inactive to find and sustain employment. The programme is available to anyone who is aged 18 years old or over and who is unemployed or economically inactive, irrespective of whether or not they are in receipt of benefit. There is no upper age limit for participating in the programme.

It is recognised that the economic downturn will have a negative impact on the overall performance of the programme. It is too early at this stage to provide any meaningful information on outcomes and due to the nature of the programme it is anticipated that performance data will be available at the end of 2009.

- **Skills and training**

DEL, through the Learner Access and Engagement Programme, is currently piloting learner support arrangements between Further Education (FE) Colleges and third party organisations. This programme is designed to encourage "hard to reach" learners, with little or no qualifications to enrol in Further Education Colleges. Colleges have indicated that they have enrolled almost 650 participants to date.

Success through Skills is the first overarching strategy for skills development in Northern Ireland. In February 2006 *Success through Skills A Programme for Implementation* was published covering the first 3 years of the strategy listed sixteen projects under the following four themes:

- Understanding the demand for skills;
- Improving the skills levels of the workforce.
- Improving the quality and relevance of education and training; and
- Tackling the skills barriers to employment and employability

### **3. DE Initiatives**

#### **Early Years Strategy**

The Early Years strategy aims to provide an integrated approach to policy and service delivery for young children. A more joined-up delivery of early years services should provide both better outcomes for children and parents and better value for the public purse. The strategy will sit well with the anti-poverty strategy by preparing all children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, for starting primary school.

Consultations with the Regional Reference Group and Project Board are planned for later in the year prior to the Strategy being made available to the Education Committee, after which time the Strategy will be issued for public consultation.

#### **Pre School Education**

The Pre-School Education Expansion Programme (PSEEP) was launched by Government in Northern Ireland in 1998. The main aim is to provide one year of high quality funded pre-school education, in the year immediately before compulsory education, (i.e. for those children aged between 3 years 2 months and 4 years 2 months at the start of the academic year) for every child whose parents wish it, thus providing a good foundation for their future learning. It is designed as a partnership between statutory and voluntary/private sectors.

Pre-school places are allocated to children on the basis of a school's (or a playgroup's) admission criteria, combined with the parents' stated order of preference for the setting they wish their child to attend. However, both statutory and voluntary sector providers are required to give priority in their admissions criteria to children from socially disadvantaged circumstances – who, research shows, benefit most from pre-school education.

### **Sure Start**

Sure Start's integrated approach to service delivery provides holistic support for children's development and support to families with young children. The wide range of services that Sure Start provides ensures that parents of young children are supported in the attainment of skills to help them to improve the life chances of their children; baby massage, cookery classes, basic skills attainment, positive parenting and child development and wellbeing.

Those children aged from birth to 4 years and their families, including pregnant women who live in the top 20% most disadvantaged wards in Northern Ireland as denoted by the NISRA multiple deprivation indices,

can access the services provided by Sure Start. This represents up to approx 34,000 children of pre-school age. There are 32 Sure Start partnership projects in the north of Ireland covering a wide geographical spread with a good rural and urban mix.

### **Every School a Good School**

The new school improvement policy, was published on 30<sup>th</sup> April. It is a pupil-centred policy with equality and improvement at its heart. A key focus is tackling underachievement and the link to socio-economic disadvantage.

The School Improvement Policy is complemented and supported by wider educational policies, particularly those relating to curriculum and assessment; literacy and numeracy; and support for children and young people with additional educational needs.

### **School Uniform Grants**

This is a new payment to help reduce the spiralling costs facing parents at this time of year and it is the first time that such a measure has been taken here.

The Education and Library Boards, which administer the scheme, have confirmed that at the end of August they paid 24,135 grants towards the cost of primary school uniforms. They have also advised that they are still processing applications for the Primary School uniform grant.

The grant for assistance towards the cost of a primary school uniform is £35 and entitlement is based on being in receipt of certain benefits.