



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## **COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION**

### **Minutes of Proceedings**

WEDNESDAY 18 MARCH 2020

Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

**Present:** Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)  
Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Robbie Butler MLA  
Mr William Humphrey MLA  
Ms Catherine Kelly MLA  
Mr Justin McNulty MLA  
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA

**Apologies:** Mr Maurice Bradley MLA  
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA

**In Attendance:** Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)  
Mr Ian McAdam (Clerical Supervisor)  
Mr Ed McCann (Clerical Officer)

*The meeting commenced at 9.56am in open session.*

The Chairperson advised the Committee that from Wednesday 18 March 2020, the Speaker and the Assembly Commission have restricted access to Parliament Buildings to essential business users only. Consequently the general public will for the time being, no longer be permitted access to the public galleries of committee meetings. However and subject to the usual procedures, any public sessions of the Committee will continue to be broadcast live for the public to view.

#### **1. Apologies**

Apologies were as indicated above.

#### **2. Chairperson's Business**

### 2.1 Revised Agenda

The Chairperson referred Members to a revised agenda for the Committee meeting deferring a briefing on the 14-19 Strategy and replacing it with an oral briefing from the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the revised agenda for the meeting.

### 2.2 Coronavirus access and briefing arrangements

The Committee noted a letter from the Speaker setting out revised access arrangements for Parliament Buildings and suggesting further regular ministerial briefings in place of Urgent Oral Questions.

### 2.3 Emergency Legislation

The Chairperson advised the Committee that a Legislative Consent Motion on an emergency coronavirus bill may be tabled this week for debate by the Assembly next week.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that in the event of a Legislative Consent Motion being tabled in respect of a Westminster Bill that contains provisions relating to the Department of Education, it would seek to have an additional meeting in order to be briefed on the relevant provisions prior to the debate taking place.

## 3. Draft Minutes

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the minutes of its meetings held on 11 March 2020.

## 4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

## 5. Ministerial Briefing – Education Authority Internal Audit / Coronavirus Response – Oral Evidence Session

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in respect of the Education Authority Internal Audit of the statutory assessment process for the provision of Special Educational Needs support.

The Minister for Education and the Permanent Secretary joined the meeting at 10.00am:

Mr Peter Weir MLA, Minister of Education, Department of Education

Mr Derek Baker, Permanent Secretary, Department of Education

The evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Minister and Permanent Secretary briefed the Committee on the Department's response to the coronavirus.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

*Mr Butler made a declaration of interest that he is a member of the board of governors for Killowen Primary School, Lisburn.*

*Mr Humphrey made a declaration of interest that he is a member of the board of governors for both Edenbrooke Primary School, Belfast and Belfast Model School for Girls.*

The Chairperson thanked the Minister and Permanent Secretary for their attendance.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking:

- sight of the Department of Education's emergency response plan and sight of its weekly situation reports covering the 5 key response areas;
- advice on the current number of schools closed or closed for training days;
- a breakdown of the additional United Kingdom Government coronavirus funding for education in Northern Ireland;
- a guarantee that all schools will have sufficient and appropriate cleaning materials (including hand sanitiser) in order to limit as far as practicable the spread of the coronavirus;
- guidance for schools on the treatment of suspected or confirmed cases of the coronavirus among pupils and guidance for teachers and parents on school attendance if members of their own families are affected;
- confirmation that non-attendance at school owing to self-isolation or virus concerns will have no adverse impact on attendance records for children; and
- confirmation, in respect of substitute teachers and classroom assistants, that salary and benefits will continue even where schools are closed owing to the coronavirus.

*11:56am Proceedings were temporarily suspended*

*12:01pm Proceedings resumed with the following Members in attendance: Mr Lyttle, Ms Mullan, Mr Butler, Ms Kelly, Mr McNulty and Mr Newton in attendance.*

## **6. Northern Ireland Teachers' Council - Coronavirus concerns in schools - Oral Briefing**

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 12:01pm:

Mr Gerry Murphy, Irish National Teachers' Organisation;

Ms Geri Cameron, National Association of Head Teachers; and

Mr Harry Greer, National Association of Head Teachers.

The witnesses briefed the Committee on concerns in schools relating to the coronavirus.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

*12:59pm. Mr Newton left the meeting.*

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their attendance.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department:

- suggesting that it provides a coronavirus helpline for schools;
- asking for sight of the virus modelling upon which decisions regarding school closure will be taken; and
- urging it to consider and to support work-arounds where there are internet connectivity issues in rural parts of Northern Ireland, so that children's learning can continue in the event of school closures.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to seek contingency planning briefings from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA); the Education Authority; Early Years and Employers for Childcare.

## **7. Correspondence**

7.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

7.2 The Committee considered correspondence from the Department regarding so-called holiday hunger.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to give further consideration to this issue.

7.3 The Committee considered a response from the Department providing a link to the current Programme for Government outcomes viewer and information regarding the system level dashboard.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to receive a demonstration on the education system level dashboard from the Department.

7.4 The Committee considered a response from the Department on children excluded from GCSE statistics. The Committee noted that the Department had not provided information on the trends in respect of GCSE exclusions as requested.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department again seeking information on GCSE statistics exclusion trends.

7.5 The Committee considered correspondence from Action for Children NI seeking a meeting with it.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to invite the group to the emotional health and well-being event.

7.6 The Committee considered a response from the Education Authority on youth sector provision.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write again to the Education Authority seeking summarised answers in particular in respect of inclusion and fairness regarding the new funding stream consultation process.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority requesting a briefing on the START programme when the evaluation report is completed.

7.7 The Committee noted a copy of a response from the Education Authority to the Regional Voluntary Youth Organisation Network regarding funding queries.

7.8 The Committee considered a letter from Armagh, Banbridge, Craigavon Primary Principals Group regarding concerns relating to the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (NI) 2016.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking a response on the issues raised including a reported obligation on schools to intervene where bullying occurs outside of school.

7.9 The Committee noted correspondence from the Parent Action Health Committee highlighting concerns in respect of the Public Health Agency and Education Authority.

7.10 The Committee noted a response from the Department indicating that officials will provide further briefings on the 2020-21 Education Budget.

7.11 The Committee noted a response from the Department providing further information on the estimated timing and projected expenditure for the Fresh Start capital projects. The Committee noted that a further £170m is to be allocated in the business cases for the Strule campus and Slemish, Parkhall, Dungannon, Drumragh and Hazelwood integrated schools

*1:10pm Proceedings were temporarily suspended*

*1:12pm Proceedings resumed with the following Members in attendance: Mr Lyttle, Ms Mullan, Mr Butler, Ms Kelly and Mr McNulty.*

7.12 The Committee considered a response from the Department of Education on the teaching of menstrual wellbeing in schools. The Committee noted that the Minister had asked officials to engage with CCEA to discuss the points raised. The Committee also noted that CCEA had been previously commissioned to undertake a review of Relationship and Sexuality Education resources.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to CCEA regarding the review of Relationship and Sexuality Education resources.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to copy the response to the Committee for Health.

7.13 The Committee noted a response from the Department setting out how school maintenance is prioritised.

7.14 The Committee noted a response from Department regarding schools with charitable status and rates relief.

7.15 The Committee noted correspondence from the Stranmillis Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement seeking to brief the Committee on its

work and a reported cut in funding for the Standing Conference on Teacher Education North and South (SCoTENS)

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to seek a related briefing from Stranmillis Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement.

7.16 The Committee noted a response from the Education Authority on current delays to SEN statements and information on the consultation on early years places in Special Schools.

7.17 The Committee noted correspondence regarding nursery placements at Rathore School.

7.18 The Committee considered an invitation to visit Access Employment Limited, Larne to see the work of its transitions programme.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to arrange a visit to Access Employment Limited.

7.19 The Committee noted a response from the Department providing information on the Independent Counselling Service for Schools.

## **8. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to suspend all external visits, informal meetings and events.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to revise its forward work programme in order to reflect the different priorities and pressures facing the Department and its Arms Length Bodies.

## **9. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

## **10. Date, Time and Place of next meeting**

The Chairperson advised Members that the Committee may have to meet early next week in order to consider emergency legislation.

The next scheduled meeting will be held on Wednesday 25 March 2020 at 9.45am in room 30, Parliament Buildings.

*The meeting was adjourned at 1:15pm.*

**Mr Chris Lyttle MLA**  
**Chairperson, Committee for Education**  
**25 March 2020**