



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 8 APRIL 2020

Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Mr William Humphrey MLA

Present by Teleconference:
Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Ms Catherine Kelly MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Justin McNulty MLA
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA

Apologies:

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Trevor Allen (Senior Assistant Clerk)

In Attendance by Teleconference:
Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Ian McAdam (Clerical Supervisor)
Mr Ed McCann (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 9:57am in open session.

The Committee adopted a revised order for agenda items

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Ministerial Briefing – Coronavirus Response – Oral Evidence Session

The Committee noted written correspondence from the Department including:

- the current version of the Department of Education Covid-19 Strategy and Plan document;
- information on the impact of the coronavirus outbreak as to the mutual recognition of GCSE and A-Level grades outside the UK;
- clarification in respect of communication and support for children during the coronavirus outbreak;
- information on the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on Special Schools;
- information regarding the impact of the coronavirus outbreak on Education Other Than at School (EOTAS) provision; and
- information on notices made by the Department under the Coronavirus Act 2020.

The Minister and officials joined the meeting by teleconference at 9:57am.

Mr Peter Weir MLA, Minister of Education

Mr Derek Baker, Permanent Secretary, Department of Education

Mr John Smith, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education

The evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Minister and his officials briefed the Committee on the Department's response to the coronavirus.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Humphrey left the meeting at 11:38am.

The Chairperson thanked the Minister and officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department welcoming its commitment to enhanced engagement with the Special Schools Strategic Leadership Group and urging it to proactively support Special Schools in respect of the need for and provision of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). The Committee further agreed to write to the Department seeking:

- a regular weekly update to the Covid-19 Strategy and Plan document;
- clarification on the status and meeting frequency of the Education Authority Board;
- an update on the Department's work with the Education Authority to reform the Special Educational Needs statementing process;
- an update on the package of measures which is to be brought forward in order to support the Childcare sector;
- an update on the substitute teacher hardship package and clarification on the equivalent scheme in Scotland;

- an update on examination arrangements in respect of vocational qualifications; and
- confirmation and an update that the Department is doing all that it can in order to ensure that no child is unsafe in their own home owing to the school and childcare closure restrictions.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson and Committee Members unanimously recorded their thanks and appreciation for teaching and non-teaching professionals across the education and childcare sectors for their tireless, innovative and professional conduct during this difficult period.

4. Matters Arising

The Committee noted a General Record of its informal meeting of 1 April 2020.

5. Correspondence

5.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

5.2 The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual regarding the need for critical thinking about science and technology.

5.3 The Committee considered a response from the Department confirming that subject to the approval of a bid for funding, the Department intends to operate a Non-Teaching Voluntary Exit Scheme (VES) in 2020/21 and providing information on its operation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to the originator of the correspondence.

5.4 The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee on Procedures seeking its views on current procedures for Legislative Consent Motions. The Committee noted that the review of Legislative Consent Motions had been suspended and indicated that it currently believed that it would be making a nil response in any event.

5.5 The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding school starting age.

5.6 The Committee noted a response from the Department on its progress in respect of the Learning to Learn policy and providing the interim evaluation of the Bright Start School Age Childcare (SAC) Grant Scheme.

5.7 The Committee noted a response from the Education Authority about its limited participation in the Protect Life 2 working group on 25 November 2019.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to return to this matter as a priority.

5.8 The Committee noted a response from the Department providing details of schools that have cumulative deficits of around £1m or higher.

5.9 The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding the procurement of the Education Authority bus fleet.

5.10 The Committee noted a response from the Department providing the Terms of Reference for the Department's review of Home to School Transport policy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reschedule a briefing on this matter.

5.11 The Committee noted a Department of Education written briefing on Sure Start originally scheduled for 25 March 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reschedule an oral briefing on this matter.

5.12 The Committee noted correspondence regarding a personal case relating to delays in providing Special Educational Needs (SEN) support.

5.13 The Committee noted a briefing paper from Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) identifying issues in education.

5.14 The Committee noted that the launch event for NICCY'S 'Too Little, Too Late' report had been cancelled due to covid-19 restrictions.

5.15 The Committee noted a NICCY report - 'Too Little, Too Late' A Rights Based Review of Special Educational Needs (SEN) Provision in Mainstream Schools in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to return to this matter as a priority.

5.16 The Committee noted a Departmental response in respect of the SEN Framework.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to return to this matter as a priority.

5.17 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence asking the Minister for Education to review the number of hours a pre-school may provide for children of key workers as part of its response to the covid-19 restrictions.

5.18 The Committee noted correspondence regarding safety concerns about private day nurseries due to the covid-19 restrictions.

5.19 The Committee noted a response from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) on its contingency plans.

5.20 The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual seeking information on university exams and projects.

5.21 The Committee noted a briefing paper from the Employers' Forum for Early Years and Childminders on the impact of covid-19 restrictions on the Childcare sector.

5.22 The Committee noted a briefing paper from Employers for Childcare on the impact of covid-19 restrictions on the Childcare sector.

5.23 The Committee noted a letter from the Minister for Education notifying the Committee that due to covid-19 restrictions, work on the Education Transformation Programme has been suspended and that it is unlikely that the Department will be able to make immediate progress on the Independent Review of Education.

5.24 The Committee noted a joint letter from the Minister for the Economy and the Minister for Education notifying the Committee that due to covid-19 restrictions work on the Transition of Young People into Careers (14-19) Project has been suspended.

5.25 The Committee noted a Departmental response providing information on how it has benchmarked the delivery and the effectiveness of its nurture provision against that provided in other jurisdictions.

5.26 The Committee noted a Strategic Investment Board investing activity report for March 2020.

5.27 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance providing an Ulster University briefing paper on the New Decade, New Approach document.

5.28 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance setting out revised arrangements for In-Year Monitoring.

5.29 The Committee considered a response from CCEA providing information on its review of Relationship and Sexuality Education resources.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a briefing on the CCEA Relationship and Sexuality Education review and hub.

5.30 The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding the guidance provided to schools on hosting political hustings.

6. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule oral evidence sessions, by teleconference, on the covid-19 response with childcare organisations and the teaching unions

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it may seek an oral update from CCEA after Easter on the revised examination arrangements.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that its meeting on 15 April 2020 would be either formal or informal depending on the availability of Parliament Buildings.

7. Any Other Business

The Committee discussed the Department's work on an emotional health and mental well-being framework.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on its progress in producing the emotional health and mental well-being framework.

8. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next scheduled meeting will be held on Wednesday 15 April 2020 at 9.45am in the Senate Chamber and by teleconference in Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:13pm.

**Mr Chris Lyttle MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
15 April 2020**