



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 29 APRIL 2020

Teleconference / Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)

Present by Teleconference:

Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Ms Catherine Kelly MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Justin McNulty MLA
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA

Apologies: Mr William Humphrey MLA

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

In Attendance by Teleconference:

Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Ian McAdam (Clerical Supervisor)
Mr Ed McCann (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 9:45am in open session.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Chairperson's Business

2.1 Post-Primary Transfer

The Committee noted reports that owing to covid-19 restrictions, primary schools and others which provide support to children preparing for post primary transfer exams have been unable to do so effectively. Consequently, it was understood

that those organisations involved in the provision of unregulated post-primary transfer tests were to ask the Minister to facilitate delays to the usual timings for post-primary transfer.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the Association for Quality Education (AQE) and the Post-Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC) to give oral evidence on issues relating to post-primary transfer and covid-19.

2.2 Teachers' Pay and Conditions Dispute

The Committee noted the reported resolution of the current and long-running teachers' pay and conditions dispute and acceptance by the teachers' unions of the Department's salary and related offers.

2.3 Childcare Support Package

The Committee noted that it had been advised that childcare providers were to receive application details for the £12m childcare package later this week.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meetings held on 22 April 2020.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Department of Education – 2020-21 Budget – Oral Evidence Session

The Committee noted further summary correspondence from the Department in respect of the 2020-21 Budget.

Officials joined the meeting by teleconference at 9:45am.

Mr Gary Fair, Director of Finance, Department of Education

Ms Susan Anderson, Deputy Finance Director, Department of Education

Mr Philip Irwin, Director of Investment and Infrastructure, Department of Education

The officials briefed the Committee on the Department's 2020-21 Budget.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The oral evidence session was reported by Hansard

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

6. Department of Education - Coronavirus Response – Ministerial Oral Briefing

The Committee noted written correspondence from the Department including its 24 April 2020 Situation Report on the coronavirus response and written responses in respect of the childcare package and notices made under the Coronavirus Act 2020.

The Minister and officials joined the meeting by teleconference at 11:03am.

Mr Peter Weir, Minister for Education

Mr Derek Baker, Permanent Secretary, Department of Education

Mr John Smith, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education.

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

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the Minister and officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarification on guidance that is to be provided to schools on issuing school reports and holding parent-teacher conferences during the covid-19 lockdown.

In respect of the 2020-21 Budget, the Committee noted that the Department of Finance resource allocation to DE amounted to £227m, leaving a very significant shortfall of £165m. The Committee expressed concern and noted that the Department may consequently struggle to meet key spending priorities including in respect of school budgets; emotional health and mental well-being support; and measures designed to address underachievement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further clarity (before the debate on 5 May 2020) in respect of how the Department is to meet key spending priorities given that its pressures exceed its allocation by around £165m.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department reiterating its support for additional funds for the high impact, low cost literacy programme operated by Booktrust NI.

The Committee also noted with concern the problem of annual pay pressures which were set to increase from around £100m pa in 2020-21 to £206m pa in 2022-23.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that pay pressures plus other recurrent pressures including addressing underachievement, special educational needs etc. may of themselves necessitate large scale reforms of education in Northern Ireland in the medium term.

The Committee noted that the challenge of covid-19 was significant and evolving.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that in the immediate term, additional measures including a catch-up premium for schools may be required which would be used to address the adverse emotional health and mental well-being and socio-economic

underachievement issues associated with educational discontinuity during the covid-19 lockdown.

The Committee also noted that it had previously sought clarity on DE covid-19 bids relating to insolvency cover for preparatory schools and boarding schools.

The Committee noted that owing to covid-19 restrictions, the timetable for delivering the Department's capital programme would be subject to continuous review throughout 2020-21.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that capital programme uncertainty, though unwelcome, was given the covid-19 restrictions, probably inevitable. However the Committee also agreed to seek clarity on the level of capital programme uncertainty as well as the rationale for the reduction in Minor Works and Youth capital expenditure programmes of £20m and £2m respectively.

The Committee noted that although the Secretary of State had confirmed that £120m of Fresh Start capital money was available for 2020-21, DE had advised that less than £20m could be spent in 2020-21. The Committee also noted clarity was awaited as to whether Treasury was to permit the Executive to re-profile all of the unspent Fresh Start capital expenditure for shared and integrated education over the next few years.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for Finance setting out its views in respect of the Budget. The Committee also agreed that the Chairperson should reflect the Committee's views at the budget debate on 5 May 2020.

7. Correspondence

Mr Newton left the meeting at 12:24pm.

7.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

7.2 The Committee noted correspondence on the work of the Transferor Representatives' Council.

7.3 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education indicating that owing to covid-19 restrictions, the Department has delayed laying the second 'Advancing Shared Education' report before the Assembly until 30 June 2020.

7.4 The Committee noted correspondence from an individual expressing concerns regarding arrangements for AS level examination marking.

7.5 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for the Executive providing a document setting out relevant references in the New Decade, New Approach document.

7.6 The Committee noted correspondence from a teacher setting out concerns relating to the provision of free school meal payments during the Covid-19 outbreak when parents don't have a bank account.

8. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed a revised forward work programme largely based on informal meetings on Mondays for non-Departmental witnesses and formal meetings on Wednesdays for Departmental and related witnesses. The Committee also agreed to include key briefings which may not be directly related to covid-19.

9. Any Other Business

Members recorded their disappointment that information had been placed in the public domain relating to DE's 2020-21 Budget prior to the Committee's formal scrutiny.

10. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next informal Committee meeting is scheduled to begin on Monday 4 May 2020 by teleconference only at 2pm.

The next formal Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 6 May 2020 in Room 29, Parliament Buildings and by teleconference from 9:15am, with formal proceedings commencing at 9.30am.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:33pm.

Mr Chris Lyttle MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
6 May 2020