



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 9 SEPTEMBER 2020

Room 29 and Video Conference, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA

Present by Video Conference:
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Ms Catherine Kelly MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Justin McNulty MLA

Apologies: Mr William Humphrey MLA

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)
Ms Paula Best (Clerical Supervisor)

The meeting commenced at 9:35am in open session

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Chairperson's Business

There was no Chairperson's business.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 2 September 2020.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Curriculum and Assessment 2021 – Northern Ireland Teachers’ Council (NITC) – Oral briefing

The Committee noted briefing papers from the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT); Irish National Teachers’ Organisation (INTO); National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT) and Ulster Teachers’ Union (UTU). The Committee also noted correspondence from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) relating to biological science practicals and the consultation on curriculum and assessment.

The following witnesses joined the meeting in person and by video conference at 9:36am:

Mr Justin McCamphill, NASUWT

Mr Kevin Daly, INTO

Mr Stephen McCord, UTU

Ms Bronagh Wright, NI President, National Education Union (NEU)

Mr Simon Mowbray, NAHT

Witnesses briefed the Committee on issues relating to the GCSE and GCE curriculum and assessment in 2020-21.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Karen Mullan declared an interest as a family member was about to undertake Year 12 studies.

Mr Newton joined the meeting at 9:59am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to NITC seeking clarity on its concerns in respect of the operation of the Northern Ireland Substitute Teacher Register (NISTR) and the C2k information technology system in schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to CCEA seeking clarification at the oral briefing on 16 September 2020 in respect of the matters raised by NITC including:

- the absence of pre-consultation on changes to the curriculum with the teaching unions;
- the inconsistency in the level of curriculum content reduction between GCSE and GCE;
- the timescale by which consultation will be undertaken and guidance issued on the curriculum for vocational qualifications;
- the timing of examinations in summer 2021 including how the CCEA timetable will align with Ofqual’s reported proposals in this regard;
- whether options to defer Key Stage transitions and introduce additional transition years are to be considered;
- how the changes to the curriculum will ensure that there is no disadvantage for non-selective schools; and

- how the so-called z-score methodology will be used transparently and fairly for the assessment of missing years in respect of A2 and GCSE grade awards in 2021.

The Committee noted with considerable surprise CCEA correspondence seeking the reasoning underpinning a recent Committee request for data relating to school Centre Assessed Grades and grading outcomes in previous year.

Mr McCrossan commented on the above and recorded his lack of confidence in the leadership of CCEA.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Clerk to respond informally to CCEA's request.

6. Restart – Department of Education and Education Authority - Oral Evidence Session

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education on Restart issues including an update dated 9 September 2020 and a recent paper on childcare issues

Officials joined the meeting by video conference at 11:02am.

Mr John Smith, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education

Mr Adrian Murphy, Head of Area Planning North Region, Department of Education

Ms Tina Dempster, Head of Childcare Strategy Team, Department of Education

Mr Dale Hanna, Director (acting) Operations and Estates, Education Authority

The evidence session was reported by Hansard.

Officials briefed the Committee on Restart in schools.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Bradley left the meeting at 11:22am

Ms Kelly left the meeting at 11:29am

Mr Lyttle left the meeting at 11:43am. Ms Mullan assumed the role of Chairperson during Mr Lyttle's absence.

Mr Lyttle rejoined the meeting and resumed the role of Chairperson at 11:47am.

Ms Mullan left the meeting at 11:48am.

Mr Butler left the meeting at 11:48am and the Committee lost its decision-making quorum.

Ms Mullan and Mr Butler rejoined the meeting at 11:51am and the Committee regained its decision-making quorum.

Mr Lyttle left the meeting at 12:07pm. Ms Mullan assumed the role of Chairperson during Mr Lyttle's absence.

Mr Lyttle rejoined the meeting and resumed the role of Chairperson at 12:09pm.

Mr Bradley rejoined the meeting at 12:31pm.

Mr Newton left the meeting at 12:31pm.

The Chairperson thanked officials for the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education and the Education Authority seeking clarity on reported operational issues associated with the C2k information technology system in schools and an update on the related procurement process.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Public Health Agency seeking a weekly update on the number of pupils and staff testing positive for covid-19 in schools and also seeking clarity on the decision-making process for the deployment of mobile testing units to schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education indicating its surprise and disappointment that the Practitioners' Group and Stakeholders' Group didn't appear to have been included in the development of proposed curricular changes by CCEA and urging the Department to rectify this omission.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department suggesting that it reconsiders the provision of funding to community crèches including those not in receipt of Sure Start support and seeking:

- comparative data for pupil and staff attendance in schools for the current period and for previous years for different school sectors;
- clarity on the decision-making process for the deployment of mobile testing units to schools;
- clarity on the timing of previous and planned future training and guidance for staff on the delivery of blended learning;
- data on the percentage of hot meals provided in schools including those for children entitled to Free School Meals;
- an update confirming that delays in processing entitlement to Free School Meals have been resolved; and
- clarity further to previous Committee correspondence as to whether costs which schools have already accrued will be covered by additional covid funding.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking:

- information on the volume of calls to its helpline and confirmation that consideration is being given to extending this support beyond normal office hours; and
- information on its rules for the allocation of funding relating to teacher substitution including whether funding will cover the provision of extra staff to allow for greater levels of support for covid-19 bubbles.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Health seeking clarity as to how it has worked with DE in order to ensure that vulnerable children were supported and protected during lockdown and will be facilitated to return to school.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister seeking sight of his guidance to CCEA and CCEA's advice to him in respect of the different options for grading models which were considered in 2020.

7. Covid-19 Correspondence

7.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming covid-19 related correspondence.

7.2 The Committee considered correspondence from the Department regarding notices issued under the Coronavirus Act 2020 indicating changes relating to duties in respect of Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarification on the position in respect of SEN best endeavours.

7.3 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department regarding Notice No.11 relating to the provision of schools meal payments until the end of the summer, and Notice No.12, which apparently allow payments to continue to children in lieu of free school meals when a child is sick.

7.4 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department (dated 27 July 2020) confirming that there were no Barnett consequentials associated with a previous HM Government announcement on covid-19.

7.5 The Committee considered correspondence from the Equality Coalition seeking an opportunity to brief on covid-19 related issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the Equality Coalition to brief it informally via video/teleconference facilities.

7.6 The Committee considered correspondence from the Equality Commission seeking an opportunity to brief on covid-19 related issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the Equality Commission to brief it informally via video/teleconference facilities.

7.7 The Committee considered correspondence from Angel Eyes NI regarding the impact of covid-19 on children and young people with visual impairment.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite Angel Eyes NI to brief it informally via video/teleconference facilities.

7.8 The Committee noted a response from the Department referring to concerns about the usability of its websites by the visually impaired which had been raised by the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to RNIB, for its information.

7.9 The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Health to the Health Committee regarding the safety of children in childcare during the covid-19 pandemic.

7.10 The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Education (dated 22 July 2020) regarding the Childcare Recovery Scheme.

7.11 The Committee noted correspondence from Unite the Union regarding financial assistance for registered childminders.

7.12 The Committee noted correspondence regarding single use plastics in schools.

7.13 The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding Special Schools' Summer Schemes.

7.14 The Committee noted a response from the Department (dated 5 August 2020) on covid-19 guidance to the youth sector and New School Day guidance.

7.15 The Committee considered correspondence from the Department regarding payments to invigilators, markers and moderators.

7.16 The Committee also considered correspondence from a concerned individual regarding the absence of payments to invigilators etc. owing to the cancellation of examinations in 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking information on how payments to invigilators and markers have been addressed in other jurisdictions and how it intends to resolve this issue.

7.17 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for Health to the Department about financial support for Health and Social Care and other public sector employees.

8. Correspondence

8.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming general correspondence.

8.2 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Finance to the Committee for Finance relating to budget allocations.

8.3 The Committee considered a response from the Education Authority relating to youth work policy and the role of the Youth Council Northern Ireland

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward this correspondence to the Youth Work Alliance, for its information.

8.4 The Committee considered a response from the Education Authority relating to Irish Medium youth groups and the new funding regime.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward this correspondence to Foram na nOg and Glor na Mona, for their information.

8.5 The Committee noted a response from the Minister for Health on the Health Action Plan.

8.6 The Committee noted the capital programme updates for July and August 2020.

8.7 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department providing the Terms of Reference for the expert panel to examine and propose actions to address links between persistent educational underachievement and socio-economic background.

8.8 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department and the Education Authority regarding failings in respect of the provision of SEN support by the Education Authority and the payment of performance related pay to directors at that time.

The Committee also noted correspondence from the chairperson of the Education Authority again declining to brief the Committee on related governance matters.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority requesting a timeline for completion of the relevant internal processes; assuring the EA chairperson that it would treat sensitive matters appropriately; and indicating that it was to seek appropriate advice including legal advice, if necessary, on compelling relevant persons and papers.

8.9 The Committee noted information on a UK-wide campaign called the Nature Premium.

8.10 The Committee noted correspondence about the Homeless Period campaign for free feminine products in schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange an informal briefing on the Homeless Period via video/teleconference facilities.

8.11 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department (dated 7 August 2020) providing an update on unplaced SEN children in transition.

8.12 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in respect of support for deaf children's learning.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to the National Deaf Children's Society, for its information.

8.13 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department responding to commentary from the National Children's Bureau (NCB) on the well-being framework.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward this correspondence to NCB and to seek a Departmental briefing on the new Children and Young Persons' Strategy, when it is available.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the Education and Training Inspectorate review of compliance with the recommended 2 hours physical activity per week in schools.

8.14 The Committee noted a report from Barnardo's on the impact of lockdown on children.

8.15 The Committee noted correspondence from the All Party Group on Women Peace and Security calling on upon the Executive to co-ordinate the response to the Women's Policy Group NI's Covid-19 Feminist Recovery Plan.

8.16 The Committee noted information on a Peace IV youth project.

8.17 The Committee considered correspondence from a concerned parent relating to the awarding of A-level grades to their daughter.

8.18 The Committee also noted correspondence from the Minister confirming that for A-level either teacher assessment or the CCEA award whichever is higher would be used.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the concerned parent reiterating its view that AS levels should be taken into account when determining grades but that it cannot get involved in individual cases.

8.19 The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned parent about the CCEA grade awarding appeals process.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to CCEA regarding concerns about the process for appealing grades.

8.20 The Committee noted correspondence about restart from a concerned individual.

8.21 The Committee noted correspondence regarding alleged bullying in a school.

8.22 The Committee noted correspondence from the Northern Ireland Forest School Association suggesting possible locations for a Committee visit.

9. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

Proceedings continued in private session from 1:01pm.

10. Forward Work Programme

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forego a regular weekly update from the Department of Education and Education Authority and instead agreed to schedule the next update on 30 September 2020 and to invite the Minister to attend on this date.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking an update on SEN statementing including the implementation of recommendations from its internal audit and from the recent NICCY report on 7 October 2020

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reschedule updates from the Youth Work Alliance and Northern Ireland Youth Forum to a later date and to schedule a planning session for 14 October 2020.

11. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 16 September 2020 in Room 29, Parliament Buildings and by video conference at 9:30am.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:18pm.

**Mr Chris Lyttle MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
16 September 2020**