



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## **COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION**

### **Minutes of Proceedings**

WEDNESDAY 13 MAY 2020

Room 29 / Teleconference, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

**Present:** Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)  
Mr William Humphrey MLA  
Mr Justin McNulty MLA

**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 Robin Newton MBE MLA

**Apologies:** None

**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 9:25am in open session*

#### **1. Apologies**

There were no apologies.

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

##### **2.1 Coronavirus commitment and compliance**

The Committee recorded its thanks to frontline workers in the education and childcare sectors for their ongoing commitment to the provision of vital services

and to children and families for their continuing compliance with lockdown restrictions.

### 2.2 Leaving Certificate

The Chairperson noted that according to press reports, the Republic of Ireland was now set to adopt the same approach as the United Kingdom in respect of formal school examinations. Specifically, it is understood that the Leaving Certificate, like GCSEs and A-levels, will be decided this year by assessment rather than by formal written examination.

### 2.3 Post-Primary Transfer

The Chairperson advised the Committee that it was understood that, owing to the impact of covid-19 restrictions on post-primary transfer examination preparations, the dates for the unregulated post-primary transfer examinations have been moved to later in November and December 2020.

## 3. Draft Minutes

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the minutes of its meetings held on 6 May 2020.

## 4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

## 5. Coronavirus and Post-Primary Transfer - Association for Quality Education (AQE) and Post-Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC)- Oral Briefing

The Committee noted: briefing papers from AQE and PPTC; a copy of the Education Authority guide on post primary admissions for 2020-21; and related correspondence from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People.

Witnesses joined the meeting by teleconference at 9:29am.

Mrs Carol McCann, Chairperson, Post-Primary Transfer Consortium;

Dr Bob Cummings, Post-Primary Transfer Consortium;

Dr Darrin Barr, Joint CEO, Association for Quality Education; and

Mr Ian Noad, Chairperson, Association for Quality Education

The witnesses briefed the Committee on the impact of the coronavirus on the post-primary transfer process.

*Mr Newton joined the meeting at 10:10am.*

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their attendance.

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

The Committee noted the Department's 11 May 2020 Situation Report on the coronavirus response and written correspondence in respect of: the Continuity of Learning Programme and notices made under the Coronavirus Act 2020.

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

Mr Peter Weir MLA, Minister for Education;

Mr Derek Baker, Permanent Secretary, Department of Education; and

Mr John Smith, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education.

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

*Mr Humphrey left the meeting at 11:25am.*

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 of Education asking how it was to tackle holiday hunger and if it was considering extending the Free School Meals payments and the EA Youth Service Eat Well, Live Well Programme into the summer months.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education suggesting that the Department undertake an audit of Information Technology (IT) provision in schools in order to establish schools' ability to support blended learning in line with the subsequent steps in the Executive's coronavirus plan.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking an update on work of the multi-disciplinary panel and the positive impact this is having on support for vulnerable children.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking information on the timing of the bid for support for the proposed substitute teacher hardship fund.

The Committee noted Departmental correspondence relating to school reports and teacher parent conferences as well as other correspondence on the consultation on the revised examinations appeal process which was launched recently by the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA).

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to CCEA inviting it to provide an oral brief on the feedback on and the next steps for the examinations appeals consultation.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that it was very concerned in respect of the impact of school closure on preparations for post-primary transfer examinations and that differential access to both IT and tutoring support during the lockdown would exacerbate existing disadvantage. The Committee further agreed that it was also

concerned that the current unsatisfactory proposals regarding delays to the post-primary transfer examinations exams would lead to a deluge of complaints, challenges and applications for special circumstances.

*Agreed:* The Committee therefore agreed to write to AQE and PPTC inviting them to give further oral and written evidence as the post-primary transfer position develops and urging both organisations to work creatively with the Education Authority and the Department of Education in order to devise a better approach to post-primary transfer so as to address the concerns set out above. The Committee further agreed to seek clarification as to whether primary schools can and will be used to host post-primary transfer examinations where health and safety and inclusion concerns can be met.

*Agreed:* The Committee also agreed to write to the Governing Bodies Association inviting it to provide oral evidence and asking it to advise on post-primary schools' contingency plans in respect of the impact of the covid-19 lockdown on post-primary transfer processes.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department suggesting that it should promptly provide guidance to schools on post-primary transfer and enrolment issues arising from covid-19 restrictions. The Committee further agreed that such guidance should provide advice in respect of the handling of an anticipated increase in requests for special circumstances relating to the covid-19 lockdown.

## **7. Correspondence**

7.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

7.2 The Committee again deferred consideration of correspondence from the Northern Ireland Forest School Association.

7.3 The Committee noted correspondence from Mears NI about its work with asylum seekers.

7.4 The Committee considered restricted correspondence from concerned parents highlighting the adverse impact of covid-19 restrictions on their child's completion of pre-school and the absence of flexibility in respect of progression paths to primary school.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking clarification as to the mitigations that may be available for the correspondents and more general mitigations in respect of pre-school to school transition during the covid-19 lockdown. The Committee agreed, in particular, to seek clarity on the process under which school years may be repeated and delays applied to progression from pre-school to Primary 1.

*Mr Newton left the meeting at 12:43pm.*

7.5 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department providing information on its key spending priorities.

7.6 The Committee noted a copy of Action for Children's Spring Bulletin.

## **8. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee noted its revised forward work programme.

## **9. Any Other Business**

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Finance seeking an update on the funding for a proposed substitute teacher hardship scheme.

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

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 20 May 2020 in Room 29, Parliament Buildings and by teleconference at 9:15am.

*The meeting was adjourned at 12:46pm.*

**Mr Chris Lyttle MLA**  
**Chairperson, Committee for Education**  
**20 May 2020**