



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 17 JUNE 2020

Room 29 and Teleconference, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

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

Present by Teleconference:

Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mr William Humphrey MLA
Ms Catherine Kelly MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Justin McNulty 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 9:06am in open session.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

2.1 Holiday Hunger – extending Free School Meal provision

The Chairperson advised the Committee of press reports indicating that the UK Government is to support the provision of Free School Meal vouchers during the

summer in England in order to tackle holiday hunger. The Department of Education has indicated that it is to seek funding for a scheme in Northern Ireland which would extend Free School Meal payments and access to the Eat Well, Live Well programme beyond 30 June 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it would support the extension of these schemes over the summer months, contingent on the relevant consequential funds being provided by the UK Government to the Department of Education.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to give further consideration to the issue of food poverty as it relates to the remit of the Department of Education in due course.

Mr McNulty joined the meeting at 9:14am.

2.2 Restart Guidance

The Chairperson drew the Committee's attention to recently issued Departmental guidance to childcare settings in respect of: minimum levels of demand; the use of playpods; the use of Personal Protective Equipment; and the care of children with Covid-19 symptoms. The Chairperson also advised the Committee of recently advised Departmental timescales for the issuing of guidance to schools on: the New School Day; curricular delivery; and vulnerable children and Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister inviting him to attend the Committee meeting on 24 June 2020 and to advise on progress in respect of the development of guidance relating to SEN, vulnerable children, childcare and Restart issues and the other relevant Covid-19 workstreams.

2.3 Freedom of Information requests

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content to delegate authority to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson during summer recess in respect of the releasing or withholding of information in any non-routine or contentious Freedom of Information requests that were received during this period.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meetings held on 10 June 2020.

Mr Butler joined the meeting at 9:20am.

4. Matters Arising

The Committee noted the recent exchange of correspondence with some post-primary schools on the subject of post-primary transfer and the consequent elucidation of strongly held opinions. In order to ensure fairness and greater equity of access for stakeholders, the Committee had previously agreed to give further consideration to an on-line opinion survey on post-primary transfer and to also consider the drafting of other correspondence on transfer issues.

4.1 On-line Survey

The Committee reviewed an on-line survey on post-primary transfer. Members suggested typographical changes and the addition of questions relating to the

reasons parents had chosen to put their children forward for transfer testing and the use of the catchment area and social deprivation criteria.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to review the survey again and provide the Clerk with any further revisions by cop on Thursday 18 June 2020 with a view to final sign-off at a subsequent Committee meeting.

Mr Newton suggested that Dr William Kitchen be invited to give evidence to the Committee on post-primary transfer and other educational matters.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to give further consideration to other groups or individuals which may be invited to the Committee in order to discuss post-primary transfer or other educational issues.

4.2 Outgoing Transfer Correspondence

The Committee considered draft correspondence to 2 post-primary schools relating to post-primary transfer and their reported decision to not use the transfer tests.

Agreed: The Committee agreed revisions to the correspondence including the inclusion of a reference to the Department of Education circular 2015/16.

5. 2020-21 Budget Allocations and June Monitoring Round– Department of Education– oral briefing

The Committee noted briefing papers from the Department of Education.

Officials joined the meeting by teleconference at 9:36am.

Mr Gary Fair, Director of Finance, Department of Education

Ms Susan Anderson, Deputy Finance Director, Department of Education

Officials briefed the Committee on the 2020-21 budget allocations and June Monitoring Round.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking clarification:

- regarding schools who have facilitated nurture units without access to Departmental funding and whether such schools will be funded in future;
- in respect of the amount of the funding that is expected to be allocated to the childcare support fund and suggesting that the balance of the funds be re-directed to supporting childcare Restart;
- in respect of the £6m bid for childcare including details of what is expected to be provided and by what timescale; and
- on the amount of the budget for Restart including a breakdown of the costs of contributory workstreams such as digital device provision.

6. Covid-19 Youth Issues Survey – Northern Ireland Youth Forum - oral briefing

The Committee noted a presentation from the Northern Ireland Youth Forum on its survey on attitudes to the Covid-19 lockdown.

Witnesses joined the meeting by teleconference at 11:02am.

Mr Chris Quinn, Transitional Director, Northern Ireland Youth Forum

Ms Lauren McAreavey, Northern Ireland Youth Forum

Mr Adam Crothers, Youth Champion for the Ards and North Down Borough Council, Northern Ireland Youth Forum

Witnesses briefed the Committee on the Northern Ireland Youth Forum's survey on the impact of Covid-19 on young people.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Humphrey made a declaration of interest that he was the President of the West Belfast Scout Council.

Mr Humphrey left the meeting at 11:59am.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Executive Office (TEO) indicating its support for the introduction of a youth press conference as part of TEO's Covid-19 communications strategy.

7. Youth Issues Funding and Covid-19 Response – Education Authority – oral briefing

The Committee noted briefing papers from the Education Authority Youth Service.

The Committee noted correspondence from the Youth Work Alliance and Fóram na nÓg.

Officials joined the meeting by teleconference at 12:01pm.

Ms Arlene Kee, Assistant Director, Youth Services, Education Authority

Mr Michael Hogg, Strategic Services Manager, Education Authority

Officials briefed the Committee on youth issues, funding and the Covid-19 response.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Bradley left the meeting at 12:47pm.

Mr Lyttle left the meeting at 12:47pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that Mr Butler should assume the role of Chairperson during Mr Lyttle's absence.

Mr Lyttle rejoined the meeting and resumed the role of Chairperson at 12:48pm.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their attendance.

Mr Newton left the meeting at 1:02pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking commentary on an extract from a previous annual report which referenced a reduction in youth facilities from 2004 to 2017.

8. Department of Education - Coronavirus Response – Written Briefing

The Committee noted an updated Department of Education Covid-19 situation report, dated 12 June 2020

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking information on the number of pupils that, following consideration by the multi-disciplinary support team, have not been permitted access to school and to set out the support that they received and to also indicate the number that didn't receive support.

The Committee considered an updated table showing the current status of correspondence with the Department regarding Covid-19 matters.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content that the updated table accurately showed the current status of correspondence with the Department regarding Covid-19.

The Committee noted correspondence from a secondary school teacher objecting to the proposed changes to term times for some pupils in August 2020.

The Committee noted responses from Royal Belfast Academical Institution, Strathearn School and Belfast Royal Academy on transfer issues.

The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual regarding alternatives to or mitigations of academic selection.

9. Correspondence

9.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

9.2 The Committee noted a response from the Department for Communities on Nurture provision.

9.3 The Committee noted correspondence from BookTrust NI thanking the Committee for its support for the Bookstart programme.

9.4 The Committee considered correspondence from the Minister regarding funding for the Northern Ireland Bookstart programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response from the Minister to BookTrust NI, for its information.

9.5 The Committee considered further correspondence from a concerned parent regarding the use of seclusion in schools where children have Covid-19 symptoms.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department suggesting that it clarify or revise the coronavirus guidance in respect of isolation/seclusion for children with Covid-19 symptoms.

9.6 The Committee considered a response from the Minister for Health on the Mental Health Action Plan.

9.7 The Committee considered a response from the Department on the Mental Health Action Plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Health asking why the review of seclusion etc. doesn't include educational settings and asking how the Mental Health Action Plan will link to the Department's Emotional Health and Mental Well-being Framework.

9.8 The Committee considered a briefing paper from the National Deaf Children's Society on the impact of Covid-19 on the education of deaf children and young people.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the National Deaf Children's Society to provide an informal briefing before summer recess.

9.9 The Committee considered a briefing paper from the Youth Work Alliance on funding issues and Covid-19 concerns.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the Youth Work Alliance and Fóram na nÓg to provide a joint oral briefing on Wednesday 1 July 2020.

9.10 The Committee noted a response from the Department about its Childcare Strategy and pre-school enrolments.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

The Committee noted that it would receive an oral briefing from the Education Authority Chief Executive and officials (but not the Chairperson of the Education Authority Board) on the Special Educational Needs statementing final report, at its meeting on 24 June 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to meet during summer recess in the week commencing 17 August 2020.

The Committee noted a list of groups involved in Emotional Health and Mental Well Being issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that Members would contact the Committee office with details of any additional groups to be added to the Emotional Health and Mental Well Being list.

11. Any Other Business

The Committee noted the unfortunate and unhelpful leaking of draft school Restart guidance to the press.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister urging him to make use of all appropriate communication channels, including the Committee for Education, in

order to ensure consistent and transparent communications with children, parents and schools.

12. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 24 June 2020 in Room 29, Parliament Buildings and by teleconference at 9:00am.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:22pm.

**Mr Chris Lyttle MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
24 June 2020**