



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 6 MAY 2020

Teleconference / Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)
Mr William Humphrey 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 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 9:19am in open session.

1. Apologies

None.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Committee recorded its thanks to frontline workers in the education and childcare sectors for their ongoing commitment and to children and families for complying with lockdown restrictions.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meetings held on 29 April 2020.

4. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a revised agenda for the meeting which included a briefing from the childcare sector.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to adopt the revised agenda.

The Committee noted a General Record of the informal meeting of 4 May 2020.

5. Coronavirus Response – Childcare Sector – Oral Briefing

The Committee noted a paper from organisations representing the childcare sector and a summary document prepared by Assembly Research on childcare support measures in different jurisdictions.

Witnesses joined the meeting by teleconference at 9:22am.

Ms Pauline Walmsley, Chief Executive, Early Years;

Ms Patricia Lewsley-Mooney CBE, Chief Executive, Northern Ireland Childminders' Association; and

Mr Philip Dalgity, Northern Ireland Daycare Owners.

The witnesses briefed the Committee on issues facing the childcare sector owing to covid-19 restrictions.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share its recent correspondence to the Minister of Education and Minister for Health on childcare support issues with representatives of the childcare sector and with the Committee for the Economy.

The Committee adopted a revised order for agenda items

6. Correspondence

6.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

6.2 The Committee considered correspondence from the Northern Ireland Forest School Association.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer consideration of this correspondence until its next meeting.

6.3 The Committee considered correspondence from Reach, North Belfast regarding the launch of a survey entitled: 'Right to Succeed'.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Reach, North Belfast seeking a briefing when the report of the survey findings is available.

6.4 The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Education providing the Committee with notice of his oral statement on Tuesday 5 May 2020 on the School Enhancement Programme.

6.5 The Committee considered correspondence from the Education Authority providing the Statutory Operations Audit of Practice report and the action plan that had been developed in response to it.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to give further consideration as to whether a formal or informal briefing was required for this important subject. The Committee also agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking further information on its improvement plan for Special Educational Needs statementing including details of: the corporate ownership of objectives; the timeline for improvement; and the projected measures of success.

7. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed a revised forward work programme including a planned formal oral briefing from the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council (NITC).

Proceedings were suspended at 10:30am.

Proceedings resumed at 10:33am with Mr Lyttle and Mr Humphrey present in room 29 and Ms Mullan, Mr Bradley, Mr Butler, Ms Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McNulty and Mr Newton present via teleconference facilities.

8. Coronavirus Response – Oral Briefing

The following officials joined the meeting by teleconference at 10:33am:

Ms Eilis McDaniel, Director of Family and Children's Policy, Department of Health;

Mr Paul Brush, Director of Early Years, Children and Youth, Department of Education;

Ms Cathy Galway, former Head of Childcare Unit, Department of Education;
and

Ms Tina Dempster, Department of Education.

The officials briefed the Committee on the Departments' response to the issues raised by the childcare sector in respect of covid-19 support measures.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Humphrey left the meeting at 11:15am.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

The Committee noted written correspondence from the Department including its 1 May 2020 Situation Report on the coronavirus response and written response from the Department of Health in respect of childcare measures. It also noted a response from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment on examination arrangements and a response from the Education Authority regarding payments to bus and taxi operators.

The following officials joined the meeting by teleconference at 11:40am:

Mr Derek Baker, Permanent Secretary; Department of Education;

Mr John Smith, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education.

The 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 officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education and the Department of Health seeking an urgent response in respect of: a timeframe for the payment of support monies to childcare providers and clarity on the available staffing resource in the Business Services Organisation (BSO) and the likely consequent timescales and capacity for the prompt processing of applications from the childcare sector for support payments.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to request that the Departments provide:

- a "1-pager" summarising the childcare support package and other available grants etc. for the sector in Northern Ireland and comparing these with the Republic of Ireland and other jurisdictions of the United Kingdom;
- guidance on the position in respect of closed childcare settings where staff are providing home-based childcare. Members sought clarity as to whether such an arrangement would leave the childcare provider ineligible in respect of the benefits of the childcare support package;
- regular updates on the roll-out of childcare support as part of the weekly covid-19 information; and
- an update on the roll-out of the Vulnerable Children Action Plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department indicating its support for enhancing resources for Youth Service in order to increase the provision of food to children and young people entitled to Free School Meals but unable to avail of the related payments. The Committee also agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking:

- information on the number of children who are entitled to Free School Meals but who have not received financial support;
- an explanation as to whether families which are eligible for Free School Meals but have not yet claimed will receive back-dated payments; and

- confirmation that the Department will explore other means of making Free School Meal payments e.g. by cheque for families without bank accounts.

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

- an update on the inter-disciplinary panel and its impact on the provision of Special Educational Needs support; and
- further clarification as to how educational psychologists are to undertake interviews with children and young people in support of Special Educational Needs statements.

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

- confirmation that educational provision is being provided to support distance learning in Special Schools; and
- an assurance that no Special Schools were wrongly interpreting Department of Education guidance and requiring both parents to be key workers before children were allowed to attend school.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking a briefing on the Continuity of Learning programme.

9. Any Other Business

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the Northern Ireland Youth Forum to provide an oral briefing on the findings of its recent survey on the impact of covid-19 on children and young people.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission the Clerk to provide a list of youth organisations which might also brief the Committee in future on covid-19 related issues.

10. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 13 May 2020 in Room 29, Parliament Buildings and by teleconference at 9:15am.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:50pm.

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