



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 24 JUNE 2020

Room 29 and Video Conference, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Robbie Butler MLA (from 10:45am)

Present by Video Conference:

Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mr Robbie Butler MLA (until 10am)
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 Video Conference:

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

The meeting commenced at 9:03am in open session

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

2.1 Free School Meals

The Chairperson advised Members of press reports indicating that the Executive had yet to sign-off on funding to extend Free School Meal vouchers and the Eat Well, Live Well programme over the summer months. The Chairperson noted however that the Minister had assured him that he expected that funding would be secured shortly.

2.2 Childcare Recovery Plan

The Chairperson referred Members to the recently received Childcare Recovery Plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on the associated financial support for the Childcare sector and the timescale by which it would be provided.

2.3 Food Poverty

The Chairperson advised that the Department for Communities is expected to undertake a stakeholder consultation on the development of a revised Child Poverty Strategy. The new strategy may include food poverty actions some of which may be influenced by the Department of Education in its role in respect of children's services co-operation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to keep the matter under consideration and determine later whether it should seek to take the lead in the scrutiny of these matters

2.4 June Monitoring

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Department's June Monitoring Round papers to the Committee for Finance, for its information.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 17 June 2020.

4. Matters Arising

The Committee noted a revised draft version of an on-line survey on post-primary transfer.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer consideration of the draft on-line survey to its meeting on Wednesday 1 July 2020.

Proceedings were suspended at 9:10am.

Proceedings resumed at 9:17am with Mr Lyttle present in Room 29, and Ms Mullan, Mr Bradley, Mr Butler, Mr Humphrey, Ms Kelly, Mr McCrossan, Mr McNulty and Mr Newton present by video conference.

5. Covid-19– Minister for Education– oral briefing

The Committee noted briefing papers from the Department of Education.

The Minister and an official joined the meeting by video conference at 9:20am.

Mr Peter Weir MLA, Minister of Education, Department of Education
Mr Derek Baker, Permanent Secretary, Department of Education
The Minister and his official briefed the Committee on covid-19 matters.
This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Newton left the meeting at 10:00am.

The Minister left the meeting at 10:00am.

Mr Butler left the meeting at 10:02am.

The Chairperson thanked the Department for the briefing.

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

- the Restart budget and in particular in respect of the funding for the Engage Programme and summer youth projects; and
- the progress of the business case relating to the provision of mobile broadband connectivity to vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking details of progress in respect of the reported unplaced 285 children in transition with Special Educational Needs statements and the support that they are to receive.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarification in respect of the New School Day guidance and whether it is intended that pupils in Year 7 (and Years 12 and 14) will be attending school full-time and undertaking education face-to face from 24 August 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update and information on the development process for Restart guidance for youth settings.

6. Special Educational Needs Statementing – Education Authority – evidence session

The Committee noted a paper from the Education Authority.

Officials joined the meeting by video conference at 10:42am.

Ms Sara Long, Chief Executive, Education Authority;

Ms Una Turbitt, Interim Director of Children and Young People's Services, Education Authority;

Ms Cynthia Curry, Head of Transformation, Education Authority

Officials briefed the Committee on the Education Authority's final internal audit report into SEN Statementing and its improvement plan.

The evidence session was reported by Hansard

Mr Butler rejoined the meeting at 10:45am.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Ms Mullan left the meeting at 12:06pm.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their attendance.

Mr McNulty left the meeting at 12:17pm.

The Chairperson noted a previous response from the chairperson of the Education Authority Board where she indicated that owing to ongoing internal processes, she would be unable to give oral evidence to the Education Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the chairperson of the Education Authority Board indicating its disappointment that she had failed to give oral evidence and seeking a timeline for the conclusion of the relevant internal processes at the Education Authority and a date at which she and the relevant chairpersons of EA sub-committees would appear before the Education Committee in order to provide oral evidence.

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

- an update on its SEN statementing improvement process and in particular the 7 key metrics identified in the improvement plan;
- an update on its work to tackle reduced timetables and informal expulsions/suspensions for SEN students in schools;
- clarification as to whether additional resources are to be redirected to the Educational Psychology Service in order to address the findings of the relevant NICCY report;
- confirmation as to whether the Education Authority is to revise the Educational Psychology Service time allocation model;
- further information on learning support units in schools; and
- an update on the new framework for Area Planning, in particular for Special Schools.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department of Education in respect of its views on the governance issues at the Education Authority which the audit report had identified and the efficacy of the improvement plan which the Education Authority had put into place.

Mr McNulty rejoined the meeting at 12:20pm

7. Correspondence

7.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

7.2 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from a concerned individual to the Minister about safety concerns relating to the reopening of schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the correspondent referring them to guidance issued by the Department of Education.

7.3 The Committee noted correspondence from a teacher about how the decision to reopen schools was communicated by the Department and the lack of consultation on the decision.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the correspondent referring them to guidance issued by the Department of Education.

7.4 The Committee noted a copy of a letter from the Committee for the Economy to the Minister for Education on re-opening the economy and the need for partnership and the impact on childcare.

7.5 The Committee noted a copy of a letter to the Minister for Education from the Committee for Communities regarding the pressure on food banks due to covid-19.

7.6 The Committee noted a response from the Education Authority about application forms for Free School Meals and school uniform grants.

7.7 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for the Economy forwarding a call for evidence from the House of Lords International Agreements Sub-Committee regarding its inquiry into UK/US Trade Negotiations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond providing a nil response.

7.8 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for the Economy forwarding a copy of correspondence to the Economy Minister including a paper from the Northern Ireland Union for Supported Employment.

7.9 The Committee considered a response from the Department of Justice to Committee queries regarding the Special Educational Needs and Disability Tribunal (SENDIST) and including guidance on disability appeals.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the issue of SENDIST customer satisfaction and alternative mediation arrangements when the Department briefs the Committee on the new Special Educational Needs and Disability Framework regulations.

8. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted its revised forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange an informal meeting with the National Deaf Children's Society on Monday 29 June 2020 at 3pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange an informal meeting on Monday 6 July 2020 at 2pm.

The Committee moved to closed session at 12:25pm

9. Any Other Business

The Committee considered correspondence from the Speaker to the Chairpersons' Liaison Group regarding potential changes to the scheduling of plenary and committee days.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond indicating concerns in respect of scheduling issues for the Education Committee relating to Bank Holidays and the processing of tabled items. The Committee further agreed to suggest that a wider impact assessment of the proposed changes be undertaken and that consideration be given to the re-allocation of committee meeting time slots.

Mr Humphrey left the meeting at 12:50pm.

The Committee noted commentary from a school principal requesting that the Committee should not send further correspondence to schools at this time.

10. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next formal Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 1 July 2020 in Room 29, Parliament Buildings and by video conference at 9:00am.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:51pm.

**Mr Chris Lyttle MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
1 July 2020**