



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

Minutes of Proceedings

5 May 2021

Meeting Location: Teleconference

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Ms Nicola Brogan MLA
Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA

Apologies: Mr Justin McNulty MLA

In Attendance by Video or Teleconference:

Ms Aoibhinn Treanor (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Craig Mealey (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Emma Magee (Clerical Officer)



Northern Ireland Assembly

Ms Sinead McMurray (Research Officer) (Item 6 only)

The meeting commenced at 9:39am in open session

1. Apologies

An apology was recorded for Mr McNulty.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed members that the recent Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) report – 'Closing the Gap', had reported that the Department of Education cannot demonstrate that £913m of Targeting Social Need and Sure Start funding that had been spent since 2005 had improved the education of disadvantaged children.

The Committee noted that the report would be considered by the Public Accounts Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to contact the Public Accounts Committee seeking a timeline for its consideration of the report.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 28 April 2021.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

5. Draft Committee motion - Restrictive Intervention and Seclusion of Children and Young People with Additional Support Needs

The Committee discussed a draft Committee motion on restrictive intervention and seclusion of children and young people with additional support needs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the motion:

That this Assembly expresses concern at the lack of statutory guidance from the Department of Education on the use of restrictive intervention on children and young people, particularly those who have additional support needs, including those with physical or learning disabilities or who are neurodivergent;

calls on the Minister of Education to:

- develop and introduce, in partnership with teachers, parents and all other relevant stakeholders, up-to-date statutory guidance on therapeutic-based, non-aversive, positive behaviour strategies;

and further calls on the Minister to:

- fund mandatory training on this approach for all staff working directly with children and young people;
- provide statutory guidance on restraint definitions, last resort definitions, and human rights based guidance in line with the UNCRC;
- introduce mandatory recording and reporting of all incidents of restrictive intervention; and
- abolish the use of isolation rooms.

6. Flexible School Starting Age – Northern Ireland Assembly Research and Information Service briefing

The Committee noted a briefing paper from Research and Information Service School Starting Age: Policy and Practice in the UK.



Northern Ireland Assembly

Ms Sinead McMurray joined the meeting by video conference at 9:24am and briefed members on the Research and Information Service paper - School Starting Age: Policy and Practice in the UK.

Mr McCrossan joined the meeting at 9:42am.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked Ms McMurray for the briefing.

Mr Sheehan joined the meeting at 10:04pm.

7. Flexible School Starting Age – Department of Education - Oral briefing

The Committee noted a briefing paper from the Department of Education on school starting age flexibility.

The following witnesses joined the meeting by video conference at 10:04am:

Ms Karen McCullough, Director, Curriculum Qualifications and Standards Directorate, Department of Education

Mr Adrian Murphy, Head of School Age Flexibility Review Team, Department of Education

Mr Sam Dempster, Head of Curriculum and Assessment Team, Department of Education

Ms Melissa Haddock, School Age Flexibility Review Team, Department of Education

The witnesses briefed the Committee on the Department of Education's proposals to introduce legislation on school starting age flexibility.

This was followed by a question and answer session on Flexible School Starting Age.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education indicating it would be disappointed if this legislation were not passed this mandate and asking the Department:



Northern Ireland Assembly

- to keep the Committee up to date on development of policy, its scale, financial implications and draft consultation options by June;
- whether the legislation will bring the Department's skills based approach in line with other jurisdictions to better cater for the holistic development of young children;
- whether the decision to retain a child for an extra year will be reviewed in this legislation;
- whether deprivation is the only reason that the current school starting age is so young in Northern Ireland;
- whether the policy will scope the broad option of universal formal schooling beginning at age 6 or 7 alongside a comprehensive childcare strategy, as well as the deferral option for individuals on such grounds as birthdate and issues related to prematurity;
- to provide, as discussed, updated figures on relative prevalence of psychology service referrals, behavioural problems and poor literacy attainment in children with May/June birthdays.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to engage with stakeholders on the proposals.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for the briefing.

8. Correspondence

8.1 The Committee noted an index of correspondence

8.2 The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Education on the provision of sport, drama, art culture and music during the restrictions and when school restarts; summer in relation to funding, covid-19 testing; and collaboration with sports clubs and community groups.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Education asking why interschool sport was not currently allowed, when this would be introduced and under what conditions.

8.3 The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Education regarding alternative examination arrangements.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) requesting an oral briefing on assessment, contingency plans and appeals arrangements.

8.4 The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Education providing further information on Covid-19 testing and the vaccination programme in Special Schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Education asking:

- how many staff and what percentage of Special School staff have been vaccinated as a result of expansion of criteria;
- For information on the outcome of positive tests and details of positive test procedures.

8.5 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education on the impact of Covid-19 on the lives of children and young people.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to Youth Groups that briefed it at its meeting on 10 March seeking their views on the information provided by the Department.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking information on the primary school counselling pilot proposed in the response, including the number of schools involved in the pilot scheme.

8.6 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education regarding transition arrangements being made for pupils at St. Mary's High School, Brollagh.

8.7 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education informing it that the Department has made The Addressing Bullying in Schools (2016 Act) (Commencement) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021.

8.8 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Health on the Autism Strategy Actions Plans.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to Autism NI seeking its views on this matter.

8.9 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for the Economy on joint working on issues relating to reform and improvement of the education system.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

8.10 The Committee noted a response from Autism NI on comparative good practice on the extent of mandatory autism training in Great Britain and statistics relating to autism and mental health statistics for people with autism.

8.11 The Committee noted a response from the Methodist Church in Ireland on the Fair Employment Treatment Order (FETO) exception.

8.12 The Committee noted correspondence from the Education Authority regarding its audit of inequalities.

8.13 The Committee noted correspondence from the Equality Commission on its report on Family and Community Engagement in Education – learning from the pandemic.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the Equality Commission to provide an oral briefing on the report.

8.14 The Committee noted correspondence from Parent Action requesting for the nomination of a member to speak at Parent Action Connects online conference, on the role of a Parent Carer Guardian in Northern Ireland. The Committee noted that it did not have a position on the role of a parent carer guardian.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to decline to nominate a speaker as it did not have an agreed position and to invite Parent Action to brief it informally on this matter.

8.15 The Committee noted correspondence about speech, language and occupational therapy services for children with Autism and the role of Belfast Health and Social Care Trust delivering these in schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority regarding this matter and any plans to change how services are delivered in schools by Health and Social Care Trusts.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Belfast Health and Social Care Trust seeking information on any plans to change how services are delivered in schools by Health and Social Care Trusts.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to copy the correspondence to the Department of Education for information.



Northern Ireland Assembly

8.16 The Committee noted correspondence about concerns that teachers were not prioritised for covid-19 vaccination.

8.17 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence to the Department of Education regarding Exam Invigilators.

8.18 The Committee noted correspondence from the Strategic Investment Board providing the Department of Education Investing Activity Report 25 April 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to change the order of its agenda.

9. Any Other Business

No other business was discussed.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed its forward work programme as amended.

The Committee moved to closed session at 11:52am

The Committee discussed issues relating to the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek further legal and procedural advice on issues raised.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking an update on issues relating to the governance of the GTCNI.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

11. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next formal Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 12 May 2021 by video conference at 9:30am.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:18pm

Chris Lyttle MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
12 May 2021