



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 9 DECEMBER 2020

Video Conference and Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Nicola Brogan MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA

Present by Video Conference:
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Mr William Humphrey MLA
Mr Justin McNulty MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)
Ms Paula Best (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Emma Magee (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 9:35am in open session.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

2.1 Cancellation of Scottish Highers

The Chairperson advised Members that the Scottish Government had announced that owing to disruption to the provision of education in schools, there would be no Advanced or Higher end of year examinations in Scotland in 2021 and that grades would be awarded based on teacher judgements.

Members recorded their concerns in respect of the absence of examination clarity in Northern Ireland. Some Members argued that GCSEs and A-levels should be

cancelled in 2021 owing to disruption to the delivery of the curriculum caused by the pandemic.

2.2 Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMMS)

The Chairperson advised Members that he and the Deputy Chairperson had met informally with Department of Education officials on 8 December 2020 in order to review the headline findings for Northern Ireland of the Trends in International Maths and Science Study 2019.

The Committee recorded its congratulations to primary schools on the consistently positive results for mathematics at Primary 6.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange a formal briefing with the Department on TIMSS.

2.3 Informal Committee Event – vulnerable children accessing support

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee had successfully undertaken an informal Zoom event on Thursday 3 December 2020 with stakeholders on issues relating to Special Educational Needs and access for vulnerable children. The Chairperson referred the Committee to a tabled note of the feedback from stakeholders. Members recorded their thanks to staff for arranging the event.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to circulate a note of the feedback from the informal event to participants for comment.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to give further consideration at a subsequent meeting to the way forward for the Committee's continuing scrutiny for this area of concern.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to give further consideration to undertaking further informal Zoom events.

2.4 Assembly Communications

The Chairperson indicated that in order to enhance the Committee's communications and media profile, he would undertake regular meetings with Assembly Communications.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to meet with Assembly Communications as indicated but that any changes to the Committee's public communications would be subject to the agreement of the Committee.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 2 December 2020.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Ministerial briefing – Covid-19 Response Issues – Oral Evidence Session

The Committee noted: correspondence from the Minister on the new Childcare Sustainability Fund; correspondence from the Equality Coalition; and a copy of a letter from the Minister for Education to schools on Christmas closure.

Mr Peter Weir MLA, Minister of Education and the following officials joined the meeting by video conference at 9:45am:

Mr Gary Fair, Finance Director, Department of Education;

Mr Ricky Irwin, Director of Inclusion and Well-Being, Department of Education;

Mr James Hutchinson, Restart Director, Department of Education; and

Ms Karen McCullough, Director Curriculum, Qualifications and Standards

The evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The Minister and officials gave oral evidence to the Committee on issues relating to covid-19 including end of year examinations, Christmas closure and transfer testing.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Ms Mullan made a declaration on interest that her daughter is in Years 12 and is expecting to undertake GCSE examinations in 2021.

Mr Butler left the meeting at 10:57am.

Mr Humphrey left the meeting at 11:15am.

The Chairperson thanked the Minister and his officials for the briefing.

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

- urging the provision of clarity as soon as possible in respect of end of year examinations;
- encouraging the Department to engage meaningfully with students and schools in the development of examination guidance;
- seeking sight of, or a timeline for, the publication of the Deloitte review on grading in summer 2020 with the recommendations for the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA); and
- seeking clarity on the position regarding vocational qualifications.

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

- asking it to set out the position for those schools which have offered pupils the option of learning remotely for the last few days before Christmas and seeking clarity as to the level of flexibility in respect of school closure or remote learning which schools enjoy;
- seeking clarity on the early school closure or other alternative options which have been scoped by the Department;
- seeking clarity on track and trace support for school leaders up to and during the Christmas break;
- seeking clarity on the additional support that has been provided to principals to provide track and trace support during term time;
- asking why no code has been provided which will allow pupil absence owing to covid-19 to be recorded; and
- calling for school staff and childcare providers to be among the first to receive covid-19 vaccinations.

Agreed: The Committee further agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking sight of the guidance to schools and test providers in respect of transfer testing and asking for clarity as to whether the primary school, the test provider, or the host school are responsible for track and trace.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking clarity on the timeline for payments to childcare providers under the Childcare Sustainability Fund Package and clarity on the amount of support and timeline for provision for the funding scheme covering temporary childcare closures in September to December 2020.

6. Seclusion, Restraint and Restrictive Practice - British Association of Social Workers (Northern Ireland) – Evidence session.

The Committee noted a briefing paper from the British Association of Social Workers (Northern Ireland).

The following witnesses joined the meeting by video conference at 11:30am:

Ms Carolyn Ewart, Director, British Association of Social Workers (Northern Ireland); and

Mr Andy McClenaghan, Communications and Public Affairs Officer, British Association of Social Workers (Northern Ireland)

The evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The witnesses gave oral evidence to the Committee on the use of seclusion, restraint and restrictive practice in schools.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Proceedings were suspended at 11:45am.

Proceedings resumed at 11:51am with Mr Lyttle, Ms Mullan, Ms Brogan and Mr McCrossan present in Room 30, and Mr Bradley and Mr McNulty present by video conference.

Mr Newton rejoined the meeting at 11:55am

Mr McCrossan made a declaration of interest that his nephew is in receipt of Special Educational Needs support.

Mr McCrossan left the meeting at 12:29pm.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for the briefing.

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

- seeking the terms of reference and the membership of the related working group and advisory panel and urging the Department to include parents, teaching unions and the British Association of Social Workers (NI);
- seeking clarity on accredited training provided to Special Schools in respect of positive behaviour strategies;
- asking what guidance/legislation from other jurisdictions the Department is to use in order to inform the development of new guidance on restrictive practice;
- asking whether existing guidance in respect of restrictive practice is mandatory or statutory and how compliance is monitored and occurrences of restrictive practice are recorded; and
- asking if the development of new guidance and training is to be part of the new Special Educational Needs Framework roll-out.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission seeking its view on the human rights implications of the current absence

of guidance relating to restrictive practice and the apparent absence of recording of related occurrences in schools.

7. Correspondence

7.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

7.2 The Committee noted a copy of a response from the Department of Education to the Committee for the Economy on the 14-19 Strategy.

7.3 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education providing information on the cost impact of both the McCloud and survivor benefit cases on the Northern Ireland Teachers' Pension Scheme.

7.4 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education on the Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.16) Notice (NI) 2020.

7.5 The Committee considered correspondence from the Minister indicating his intention to bring a paper to the Northern Ireland Executive in relation to a 3-year pilot scheme to address period poverty in schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education reiterating its support for the free provision of period products to all schools and seeking clarity on why a further pilot scheme is suggested and an Executive Direction is required; and seeking an urgent informal meeting with officials to discuss this matter (or failing that a formal briefing at a later date).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Minister's letter on the period poverty pilot to the Homeless Period organisation.

7.6 The Committee noted a response from the Department providing details of a North Belfast schools pilot project on addressing period poverty.

7.7 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education providing the Middletown Centre for Autism's Annual Report and Accounts 2019-20.

7.8 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education advising on the publication of the results of the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019.

7.9 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education in respect of the Ulster University report on segregation in pre-schools.

7.10 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education concerning the Independent Review of Integrated Education and confirming that the outstanding recommendations will be considered in the Terms of Reference of the New Decade New Approach review of education.

7.11 The Committee noted a response from the Minister for Health regarding the consultation on cross-departmental actions for vulnerable children and young people during the covid-19 pandemic period.

7.12 The Committee noted correspondence from the Education Authority advising that consultations on Special Schools Area Planning and Mainstream Learning Support Centre provision had been extended to 11 February 2021.

7.13 The Committee noted correspondence from the principal of Strandtown Primary School regarding concerns about the Special Educational Needs Framework.

7.14 The Committee noted a response from the Children's Law Centre providing a definition of chemical restraint and enclosing a paper entitled 'Reducing the Need for Restraint and Restrictive Intervention'.

7.15 The Committee noted a report entitled 'Urgent Plan for Safer Schools' from the independent SAGE organisation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the report to the Department of Education seeking its comments on the issues raised.

7.16 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance providing a copy of an Assembly Research paper entitled "Pilot Project – Proactive Committee Use of Departmental Forecasting & Outturn Data".

7.17 The Committee noted a call for evidence from the Committee for Justice on the Criminal Justice (Committal Reform) Bill.

7.18 The Committee noted the Investing Activity Report for the Department of Education for November 2020.

7.19 The Committee noted an invitation from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to attend the virtual launch of its 2020 Annual Statement on Thursday 10th December 2020.

8. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed its Forward Work Programme as amended.

9. Any Other Business

Mr Newton left the meeting at 12:59pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue a press release on the Trends in International Maths and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019.

10. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 16 December 2020 in Room 29, Parliament Buildings and by video conference at 9:00am.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:00pm.

Mr Chris Lyttle MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
16 December 2020