



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 13 January 2021

Video Conference and Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Nicola Brogan MLA
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA
Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA

Present by Video Conference:

Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Justin McNulty MLA

Apologies: None

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

The meeting commenced at 9:37am in closed session.

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

A revised order for agenda items was adopted.

1. Evidence session with the Minister of Education - Covid-19 - school closures, exam contingency and post primary transfer

The Committee noted Departmental correspondence setting out Continuity Direction No.1, correspondence from the Minister in relation to GCSE, AS & A Level examinations in 2021, Departmental correspondence regarding a further childcare support scheme, and items of correspondence from schools and concerned individuals relating to public examinations, post-primary transfer testing, school closure/opening and Special Schools.

Mr Peter Weir MLA, Minister of Education and the following officials joined the meeting by video conference at 9:37am:

Mr Ricky Irwin, Director of Inclusion and Well-Being, Department of Education;
Mr James Hutchinson, Restart Director, Department of Education;
Ms Janis Scallon, Sustainable Schools Policy and Planning 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 school closures, exam contingency and post-primary transfer.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Humphrey made a declaration of interest that he was a member of the board of governors of Edenbrooke Primary School and Belfast Model School for Girls.

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for Education:

- indicating its support for prioritising staff in schools and special schools for covid-19 vaccination;
- asking him to convene as a matter of urgency a meeting of party Education representatives to have a round table discussion to address solutions and alternatives to the transfer test;
- Seeking attendance data for schools and special schools since the start of the new period of restrictions; and
- Asking for the Department's position on alternative criteria for academic selection.

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

- What discretion is available to prioritise vaccination of staff in schools and special schools;
- Asking him to seek prioritisation of staff in schools and special schools for covid-19 vaccination.

2. Impact of COVID 19 - Youth Work Alliance/Uniform Hub/Network Youth NI

The Committee noted briefing papers from the Youth Work Alliance, Network Youth NI and the Uniform Hub.

The following witness joined the meeting in person at 11:45am:

Mr Stephen Dallas, Chief Executive Officer, Youth Work Alliance;

The following witnesses joined the meeting by video conference at 11:45am:

Ms June Trimble (MBE), Chief Executive Officer, Youth Action Northern Ireland;

Mr Stephen Barr, Service Manager, Start 360;

Ms Claire King, Hub Facilitator, Uniform Hub;

Mr Jonathan Gracey, Scouts NI, Uniform Hub; and

Ms Claire Flowers, Girlguiding Ulster, Uniform Hub

Mr Humphrey made a declaration of interest that he was a Board Member of the Streetbeat Youth Project and President of the West Belfast District Scout Council.

The witnesses briefed the Committee on the impact of Covid-19 on youth work and indicated that they believed that youth workers should be prioritised for vaccination.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Newton left the meeting at 12:35pm.

Mr Butler made a declaration of interest that he is a Boys' Brigade Officer.

Mr Bradley left the meeting at 12:46pm.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department:

- Seeking information on funding arrangements for youth organisations with regard to programmes that they were unable to deliver due to covid-19 restrictions and carry-over of unspent funding at the end of the financial year; and
- Expressing concerns about guidance preventing the reopening of outdoor activities while allowing indoor activities to resume.

3. Apologies

There were no apologies.

4. Chairperson's Business

4.1 Congratulations

The Chairperson congratulated Mr William Humphrey MLA on the announcement that he has been awarded a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE).

4.2 Best wishes

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the departing Clerk offering its best wishes.

4.3 Informal meeting with Belfast City Council Youth Group

The Chairperson reminded the Committee that Members had met informally with the Belfast City Council Youth Group via teleconference on Tuesday 12 January 2021 to discuss issues relating to Relationship and Sexuality Education at school.

The Committee noted a record of the issues discussed at the meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking its views on the recommendation in the Belfast Youth Forum 'Any Use' report on Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in schools; and to write to CCEA for further information on the RSE Hub.

4.4 Update on Budget Scrutiny from Clerk to the Finance Committee

The Chairperson informed members that the Committee for Finance would be briefed on the Draft Budget 2021/22 by the Minister of Finance and that relevant public proceedings would be broadcast on the Assembly's live stream from 2pm on Wednesday 13 January 2021.

5. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 16 December 2020.

6. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

7. Correspondence

7.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

7.2 The Committee noted a notice of a public petition regarding free period products in all schools laid in the Assembly on 15 December 2020.

7.3 The Committee noted correspondence from the Executive Office highlighting concerns regarding the scrutiny by committees of United Kingdom Common Frameworks which overlap with devolved matters and which had been developed following the UK's departure from the European Union.

7.4 The Committee noted a response from Department of Education to issues regarding looked after children.

7.5 The Committee noted a response from Ulster University regarding Looked after Children setting out how the primary and post-primary Initial Teacher Education programme includes developing an awareness of looked after children

7.6 The Committee noted a response from Stranmillis University College regarding looked after children setting out how the primary and post-primary Initial Teacher Education programme includes developing an awareness of looked after children.

7.7 The Committee noted a response from Department of Education regarding the Special Educational Needs Framework.

7.8 The Committee considered a response from Department of Education regarding support for Dyslexic Children.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to Dyslexia NI who raised these issues with it.

7.9 The Committee noted a correspondence on Child Sexual Exploitation and the implementation of the Gillen recommendations including education in respect of sexual consent.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Gillen Review Implementation Team reflecting stakeholder views on Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in schools.

7.10 The Committee noted a response from the Education Authority on procurement arrangements in schools.

7.11 The Committee noted a Strategic Investment Board Investing Activity Report for Department of Education for December 2020.

7.12 The Committee considered correspondence from Heatboss about concerns that the guidance in relation to single-use plastics in school.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education asking what steps are to be taken to ensure that all schools are aware of this policy and suggesting that they make the policy more accessible.

7.13 The Committee considered correspondence from Parent Action NI seeking to brief the Committee on restrictive practice, seclusion and restraint in schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange an oral briefing with Parent Action NI on restrictive practice, seclusion and restraint in schools.

7.14 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for the Economy to the Executive Office highlighting concerns regarding the projected ending of Covid support schemes.

Mr Humphrey left the meeting at 1:16pm.

8. Forward Work Programme

The Committee moved to closed session at 1:20pm.

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

The Committee returned to public session at 1:35pm.

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

9. Any Other Business

No other Business was discussed.

10. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next formal Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 20 January 2021 in room 29, Parliament Buildings and by video conference at 9:00am.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:36pm.

Mr Chris Lyttle MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
20 January 2020