



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## **COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION**

### **Minutes of Proceedings**

**WEDNESDAY 16 DECEMBER 2020**

Video Conference and Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

**Present:** Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)  
Ms Nicola Brogan MLA  
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA  
Mr William Humphrey 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:** Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)  
Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)  
Ms Paula Best (Clerical Supervisor)  
Ms Emma Magee (Clerical Officer)  
Dr Robert Barry (Assembly Research) for item 1 only

*The meeting commenced at 9:04am in closed session.*

#### **1. Assembly Research - Report on Grade Awards 2020**

The Committee noted a briefing paper from Assembly Research.

Dr Robert Barry briefed the Committee on his paper entitled 'NI GCE A-Level Forecasts v Grades Awarded: 2017-2020'.

*Mr Bradley joined the meeting at 9:09am*

This was followed by a question and answer session.

*Mr Humphrey joined the meeting at 9:28am.*

The Chairperson thanked Dr Barry for the briefing.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking a further update on the publication of the Deloitte review on grading in summer 2020.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to consider publication of the relevant Assembly Research papers after it has considered the report of the Deloitte review on grading in summer 2020.

## **2. Impact of COVID 19 - Access to Special Educational Needs for Vulnerable Children**

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education on the Department of Health-led cross-departmental Action Plan for vulnerable children and young people during the Covid-19 pandemic period and a related written submission from the Royal College of Occupational Therapists.

*Mr Butler joined the meeting at 9:39am.*

The Committee considered bringing a motion to plenary for debate in relation to the adverse impact of the pandemic on access to Special Educational Needs support for vulnerable children.

*Ms Mullan left the meeting at 9:45am*

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to submit the following motion for debate in plenary:

*“That this Assembly takes note of the numerous stakeholder reports relating to the adverse impact of the pandemic on access to Special Educational Needs support for vulnerable children; calls on the Minister of Education to bring forward appropriate measures in order to ensure a minimum level of consistent access to Special Educational Needs supports for all vulnerable children; and further calls on the Minister to work with the Executive to provide the associated resources required to cover these services for all future pandemic-related disruptions to education.”*

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to publish a note on its stakeholder event (held on 3 December 2020) on the adverse impact of the pandemic on access to Special Educational Needs support for vulnerable children and other relevant papers.

*Proceedings continued in public session from 9:58am.*

## **3. Apologies**

There were no apologies.

## **4. Chairperson’s Business**

### **4.1 Period Poverty**

The Chairperson informed Members that Departmental officials had declined to provide a briefing on the Minister’s paper to the Executive on period poverty until the matter had been considered by the Executive.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to receive an informal briefing from officials on period poverty on Friday 18 December 2020.

The Chairperson referred Members to correspondence from Mr Pat Catney MLA regarding his Private Member’s Bill relating to period poverty.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to respond to Pat Catney MLA indicating its support for the free provision of period products in schools.

#### 4.2 Ministerial Statements

The Chairperson referred Members to correspondence from the Minister on the Terms of Reference for the independent review of education. The Chairperson reminded Members that the Minister had made statements on Tuesday 15 December 2020 on this matter and on examination contingencies for 2021.

The Chairperson advised that the Deputy Chairperson had met informally with the Minister after the statements were complete in order to discuss the above.

The Chairperson noted that Members had been provided with sight of these substantial statements at very short notice allowing insufficient time for proper consideration.

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

- inviting the Minister to provide a briefing on examination contingencies at the Committee meeting of 13 January 2021;
- seeking clarity on the covid-19 tariff (including the number of qualifying days of covid-related absence and the scheme under which the additional marks would be allocated) and the reported extension to 2021 of “generous” marking schemes applied in 2020;
- seeking information on the methodology which will be used to determine what will be omitted from examination specifications at A-Level in 2021;
- seeking clarity as to whether an Equality Impact Assessment has been undertaken in respect of the examination contingencies; and
- asking why a similar level of intervention has not been applied to post-primary transfer testing.

#### 4.3 Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill

The Chairperson reminded the Committee that it had previously considered correspondence from the Committee for Communities in respect of the Licensing and Registration of Clubs (Amendment) Bill. The Chairperson noted that the proposed legislation may affect the organisation of school discos and formal events in licensed premises.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the National Association of Head Teachers and the Association of School and College Leaders suggesting that these groups, which represent school principals, may wish to reply to the Committee Stage of the Bill in respect of these relevant matters.

#### 4.4 Freedom of Information requests during recess

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that it was content to delegate authority to consider any non-routine contentious Freedom of Information requests to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson during the forthcoming recess period.

## 5. Draft Minutes

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 9 December 2020.

## **6. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

## **7. Period Poverty - Department of Education – Oral Briefing**

The Departmental oral briefing was cancelled.

*A revised order for agenda items was adopted.*

## **8. Correspondence**

8.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

8.2 The Committee considered a response from the Education Authority on the One Project.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to arrange an oral briefing with the Education Authority on the One Project.

8.3 The Committee considered a response from the Education Authority on the use of single use plastics in schools.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to forward the response to Heatboss who had raised concerns in respect of single use plastics and the impact on the environment.

8.4 The Committee noted a response from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) to a Committee suggestion regarding a menu-based approach to be used for A-levels and GCSEs.

*Mr McNulty joined the meeting at 10:11am.*

8.5 The Committee noted a response from the Minister in respect of the General Teaching Council Northern Ireland's (GTCNI) absence of legal vires to investigate or sanction teachers for misconduct. The response indicated that relevant legislation may be brought forward by the summer of 2021.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to invite the Department of Education and GTCNI to provide it with an oral briefing on issues relating to the legal vires for the sanctioning of teachers for misconduct.

8.6 The Committee noted a copy of a letter to the Executive Office from the Chairpersons of the Committees for the Economy, the Executive Office, Health and Communities regarding student health and well-being during the pandemic and seeking a co-ordinated approach.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the interim Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland and seek an oral briefing on student and pupil well-being during the pandemic.

8.7 The Committee noted correspondence from the Reverse the Trend Foundation providing information on a multi-agency approach to the roll out of a Covid-19 curriculum recovery, restart and resilience programme for children and young people in Northern Ireland.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking information on the Covid-19 curriculum recovery, restart and resilience programme.

8.8 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from Carrowdore Primary School to the Minister asking for guidance on track and tracing during the Christmas break.

The Committee also noted a response from the Department of Education about school Christmas closures and track and trace arrangements

8.9 The Committee noted correspondence from a number of pupils and a parent regarding concerns about A-level examinations.

8.10 The Committee noted correspondence from a parent setting out concerns relating to the scheduling of post-primary transfer tests.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department of Education seeking a response to the issues raised in respect of post-primary transfer testing.

8.11 The Committee noted correspondence from the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) providing its report on Special Educational Needs.

8.12 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education providing a copy of a Commencement Order for Section 1 of the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act (NI) 2016, which requires the Education Authority and the Department of Education to have regard to the voice of the child in developing policy and delivering services.

8.13 The Committee noted a response from the Children's Law Centre on post-primary transfer testing and the associated impact on children's rights.

*Agreed:* the Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department of Education seeking commentary on post-primary transfer testing and the associated impact on children's rights.

8.14 The Committee noted a copy of a Pivotal report on 14-19 education, skills and training.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to invite Pivotal to provide it with an oral briefing on relevant aspects of its report on 14-19 education, skills and training.

8.15 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for Justice to the Executive Office about the scrutiny of Health Protection Regulations.

8.16 The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister to school principals indicating an enhanced programme of on-line autism training for teachers.

8.17 The Committee considered a response from CCEA replying to concerns raised by schools and pupils in respect of A-Levels.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to forward the reply to the originators of the correspondence.

8.18 The Committee noted correspondence from Methodist College in respect of a recent Committee meeting and commentary linked to a reported covid-19 outbreak.

8.19 The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned parent relating to restrictive practices in schools.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write again to the Department of Education seeking information on training for school staff on positive behaviour strategies in mainstream schools.

8.20 The Committee noted an extract from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission annual statement.

8.21 The Committee noted a response from CCMS on the retention of the Fair Employment and Treatment (Northern Ireland) Order 1998 (FETO) exemption and setting out its policy in respect of the Certificate in Religious Education (CRE)

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to invite CCMS to provide an oral briefing on the FETO exemption and CRE.

8.22 The Committee noted correspondence to the Minister from a concerned parent regarding the post-primary transfer test.

8.23 The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned teacher suggesting that education professionals should receive early access to covid-19 vaccinations.

8.24 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Justice regarding the Department of Education's role in advising and educating young people on the criminal law in relation to sexual offences including the age of consent for sexual relations.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to ask the Department of Education to copy its response to the Committee for Justice (on its role in educating young people on the criminal law in relation to sexual offences) to the Committee for Education.

## **9. Revised Children and Young People's Strategy – Department of Education - Oral Briefing.**

The Committee noted a revised Children and Young People's Strategy.

The following officials joined the meeting by video conference at 10:34am.

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

Mrs June Wilkinson, Head of Children and Young People's Strategy Team, Department of Education

Ms Dreena Evans, Children's and Young People's Strategy Team, Department of Education

The officials gave oral evidence to the Committee on the revised Children and Young People's Strategy.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

*Mr Humphrey left the meeting at 11:49am.*

The Chairperson thanked the officials for the briefing.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education calling for the Strategy to include greater joined-up-ness in tackling paramilitarism and also calling for sport to be explicitly included in the Strategy and for this to be reflected in the relevant implementation plan. The Committee also agreed to seek:

- a further detailed informal briefing on the Children and Young People's Strategy;
- sight of the implementation plan including how it is to reduce division in education and society;
- the Terms of Reference for the Children and Young People Participating in Decision-Making project;

- the timescale for the development of the on-line safety strategy;
- clarity as to how the Strategy will prevent religious stereotyping;
- clarity on the rights of children to absent themselves from collective acts of religious worship in school with/without parental permission; and
- a briefing paper on youth engagement models used in this and other jurisdictions.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to invite relevant representatives of the Government of the Republic of Ireland and Professor Laura Lundy, Queen's University of Belfast to brief it on youth engagement and the Dublin experience.

## **10. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

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

## **11. Any Other Business**

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Association for Quality Education (AQE) and the Post Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC) asking each organisation how they are to ensure that post-primary transfer testing will be provided in an environment that complies with Public Health Agency guidance.

The Committee noted an email from the Department of Education clarifying that track and trace arrangements over the Christmas period had previously been shared with school principals.

## **12. Date, Time and Place of next meeting**

The next formal Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 13 January 2021 in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings and by video conference at 9:30am.

*The meeting was adjourned at 12:00noon.*

**Mr Chris Lyttle MLA**  
**Chairperson, Committee for Education**  
**13 January 2020**