



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 18 NOVEMBER 2020

Video Conference and Room 29, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA

Present by Video Conference:

Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Mr William Humphrey 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)

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

1. Chairperson's Business

1.1 Independent Review of Education

The Chairperson referred Members to the terms of reference for the New Decade New Approach independent review of education.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the Minister welcoming the independent review and expressing concerns that the ambitious timescale may not be achievable. The Committee further agreed to suggest that the terms of reference be amended in order to ensure consideration would be given to: school starting age flexibility; post-primary transfer testing; and the relationship between Initial Teacher Education providers and the Department. Finally, the Committee agreed to indicate that the reference group should include Special Schools leaders and to request clarity on the separate review of the Education Authority and the overlap with the Department's Transformation Programme.

1.2 Northern Ireland Teachers' Pension Scheme

The Chairperson advised Members that the 2019-20 Annual Report and Accounts of the Northern Ireland Teachers' Pension Scheme had been circulated by email. The Chairperson advised that the accounts show significant liabilities associated with the McCloud judgement and a judgement relating to the rights of same sex partners.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on the likely impact of relevant judgements on the short-term costs of providing teachers' pensions and the timescale by which the extent of related liabilities will become known.

Mr Humphrey joined the meeting at 9:43am.

Mr McCrossan joined the meeting at 9:43am.

2. Apologies

There were no apologies.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 11 November 2020.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Impact of Covid-19 and Vulnerable Children's Support – Children's Law Centre – oral briefing

The Committee noted a briefing paper from the Children's Law Centre.

The following witnesses joined the meeting by video conference at 9:44am:

Rachel Hogan, Special Education Needs Representative, Children's Law Centre;

Kathryn Stevenson, Solicitor, Head of Legal Services, Children's Law Centre;
and

Eamonn McNally, Mental Health Solicitor, Children's Law Centre

The witnesses provided a briefing on the impact of the covid-19 lockdown on vulnerable children's access to Special Educational Needs support.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Bradley joined the meeting at 10:22am.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for the briefing.

6. Consultation on Covid-19 Cross-sectoral Support Plan for Vulnerable Children - Department of Education / Education Authority / Department of Health – oral briefing

The Committee noted the consultation document on the Covid-19 Vulnerable Children, Cross-Departmental Action Plan.

The following officials joined the meeting by video conference at 11:25am:

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

Brenda Shearer, Head of Special Education, Department of Education;

Michele Corkey, Director of Education, Education Authority;

Shauna Collinson, Interim Assistant Director of Pupil Inclusion, Wellbeing and Protection, Education Authority;

Eilís McDaniel, Director of Childcare and Family Policy, Department of Health;

Mark Lee, Director, Mental Health, Disability, Older People, Department of Health;

The following officials joined the meeting by teleconference at 11:50am:

Geraldine Teague, Lead Allied Health Professionals Consultant, Public Health Agency; and

Maurice Leeson, Children's Services Planning Professional, Health and Social Care Board.

The witnesses briefed the Committee on cross-sectoral support for vulnerable children.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Humphrey left the meeting at 12:03pm.

Mr Butler made a declaration of interest that he was a part-time foster parent.

Mr McCrossan left the meeting at 12:31pm.

Mr Newton left the meeting at 1:02pm

The Chairperson thanked the officials for the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the Department of Health-led consultation and to copy the response to the Education Authority and the Ministers of Education and Health. The Committee noted the apparent and significant disparity between stakeholders' evidence on the variable and inadequate provision of Special Educational Needs (SEN) services to vulnerable children and officials' assertions to the contrary. Consequently, the Committee agreed to urge the departments to gather robust evidence from a wide-range of stakeholders in order to develop improved policies in this regard.

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

- calling for the departments to establish a multi-disciplinary, cross-departmental coherent and permanent process for ensuring that vulnerable children gain access to SEN support. The Committee agreed that this should be a transparent, single point of entry process with a named officer responsible for each child;
- calling for the Department of Education to bring forward a Temporary Continuity Direction for SEN access for vulnerable children with the associated resources to cover all future pandemic-related disruptions to education;
- calling for the Department to ensure that schools are provided with resources in order to allow them to provide flexible SEN support including outside usual school hours;

- seeking sight of recent evaluations of SEN services for vulnerable children which have been undertaken by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI);
- seeking sight of the recent lessons learned report associated with the cross-sectoral support process for vulnerable children;
- seeking sight of recent Health and Social Care Board specialist reports relating to wellbeing and family support;
- seeking a breakdown of the four thousand referrals to the Family Support Hubs and information on the associated increase in resources;
- seeking information on the level of partial timetables in use in Special Schools;
- seeking an update on the attendance of children at school with aerosol-generating conditions;
- seeking commentary on the reported staffing crisis in Special Schools and whether volunteer resources secured during lockdown has been used or may be used to address this problem; and
- seeking information on the uptake of training by schools in respect of measures to support pupils with dyslexia.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Children's Law Centre:

- seeing clarity on the meaning of chemical restraint and information on the numbers of pupils affected;
- seeking quantification on the level of mainstream school mental health issues that have been highlighted by its clients; and
- seeking its views on the rights issues associated with the staging of end of year examinations following periods of educational disruption.

7. Correspondence

7.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

7.2 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education on school closures over Halloween.

7.3 The Committee noted a response from the Department providing the terms of reference of the postponed review of the Common Funding Scheme.

7.4 The Committee noted a response from the Department in respect of symptomatic pupils held in seclusion at school.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to the parent who provided the initiating correspondence.

7.5 The Committee noted a response from the Department regarding funding of the Standing Conference on Teacher Education, North and South (SCoTENS).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to Dr Purdy who provided the initiating correspondence.

7.6 The Committee noted a response from the Department about the development of an Engage Programme for Special Schools.

7.7 The Committee noted a response from the Education Authority on providing services for visually impaired children.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request that the Education Authority provide an oral briefing on services for visually impaired children.

7.8 The Committee noted a further response from the Education Authority regarding disruption to learning for primary school children and the extra costs of facilitating post-primary transfer testing.

7.9 The Committee noted correspondence from a parent with concerns about post-primary transfer.

7.10 The Committee noted correspondence from a parent concerned about post-primary transfer.

7.11 The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned parent about post-primary transfer.

7.12 The Committee noted correspondence from the '#BringChange,campaign' calling for a public inquiry into the current arrangements for post-primary transfer tests.

7.13 The Committee noted correspondence from a pupil indicating concerns about changes to the GCSE English Literature examination.

7.14 The Committee noted correspondence from the Head of English, Bloomfield Collegiate expressing concerns regarding changes to the GCSE English examination.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and seek its views as to whether a menu approach could be adopted for GCSEs and A-levels which would allow schools more flexibility in selecting which parts of the curriculum would be subject to assessment.

7.15 The Committee noted correspondence from Action for Children on the impact of lockdown on vulnerable children accessing childcare.

7.16 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for the Executive Office providing a copy of a request for written evidence from Michael Gove MP, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Minister for the Cabinet Office, on issues relating to the UK's future relationship with the European Union.

7.17 The Committee noted correspondence from Belfast City Council seeking a meeting involving a youth group which has devised a report on young people's views on Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange an informal meeting to hear young people's views on their RSE report.

7.18 The Committee noted an invitation from Holy Trinity College for the Chairperson to visit and review the work of its Agriculture Club.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the school congratulating it on the work of its Agriculture Club and indicating that owing to public health restrictions, it would not carry out any external visits at this time.

7.19 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance providing an update on the Peace Plus programme.

8. Forward Work Programme

Agreed: The Committee agreed its Forward Work Programme.

9. Any Other Business

Members raised concerns in respect of examinations starting next week and the reported absence of guidance for schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister urging him to issue covid-appropriate guidance to schools as soon as possible in order to facilitate autumn series examinations.

10. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 25 November 2020 in Room 29, Parliament Buildings and by video conference at 9:00am.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:37pm.

Mr Chris Lyttle MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
25 November 2020