



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## **COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION**

### **Minutes of Proceedings**

WEDNESDAY 24 FEBRUARY 2021

Video Conference

#### **Present by Video Conference:**

Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)  
Mr Pat Sheehan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Ms Nicola Brogan MLA  
Mr Robbie Butler MLA  
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA  
Mr Justin McNulty MLA  
Mr Robin Newton MBE 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)  
Ms Sinead McMurray (Research Officer) (Item 5 only)

*The meeting commenced at 9:34 am in public session.*

#### **1. Apologies**

There were no apologies.

#### **2. Chairperson's Business**

2.1 The Committee noted correspondence from the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council (NITC) regarding concerns that the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI) is not functioning as it should be and does not have the confidence of the profession.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to invite the Department of Education to brief it on the GTC and legislation regarding its vires.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to invite NITC to brief it informally about its concerns in relation to GTCNI.

2.2 The Chairperson referred members to a response from the Department of Education about the experience of LGBTI pupils in school. The response notes that relevant provisions of the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 have not yet been commenced.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to request a briefing on the delay in commencement of these provisions and an update on Education legislation generally.

2.3 The Chairperson referred members to a survey about teaching of computer studies and coding in Primary Schools.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to Department of Education and the Education Authority seeking a substantive reply to the questions asked in the survey.

2.4 The Chairperson and Committee members discussed the recent announcement regarding school restart.

*Mr Newton joined the meeting at 9:40am.*

2.5 The Chairperson informed members that the Public Accounts Committee would be launching its report on Special Educational Needs this week. The Committee noted that DE would provide a Memorandum of Response to PAC's recommendations in 8 weeks' time.

2.6 The Chairperson thanked Paula Best for her work on behalf of the Committee.

### **3. Draft Minutes**

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 17 February 2021.

### **4. Matters Arising**

There were no matters arising.

*The Committee moved to closed session at 9:47 am.*

### **5. Assembly Research - Briefing on UNCRC including Restraint & Seclusion**

The Committee noted Assembly Research Briefing papers – 'Children's Rights and Educational Policy in Northern Ireland: Implementation of the UNCRC' and 'Restraint and Seclusion of Children with Additional Needs NIAR 210\_2020'.

The Committee was briefed on the papers by Ms Sinead McMurray.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to make the briefing papers publicly available and to share these with Department of Education.

*Agreed:* The Committee commended the authoritative and objective research briefing and agreed to hold future Assembly Research briefings in public session unless there was an overweening reason not to.

### **6. Restrictive practice, seclusion and restraint - Parent Action briefing**

The Committee noted a record of an informal meeting with Parent Action on 23 February 2021 and briefing papers from Parent Action.

The following witnesses joined the meeting by video conference at 10:52 am:

Ms Orla Watt, Director / Nurse Consultant, Parent Carer Advocacy

Mrs Deirdre Shakespeare, Parent, ICARS activist

Ms Beth Morrison, CEO, Positive & Active Behavioural Support Scotland.

The witnesses briefed the Committee on restrictive practice, seclusion and restraint.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked witnesses for the briefing.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education: forwarding and endorsing the recommendations of Parent Action; highlighting the need for a children's rights based approach allowing children with learning disabilities equal access to education; seeking clarity on the statutory responsibilities of the Department to record and consult with parents about incidents; stressing the need for training to give teachers de-escalation skills and communications techniques rather than punitive responses to non-neurotypical expressions of anxiety; requiring the urgent development of guidance to rule out resorting to restraint and seclusion; and supporting the introduction of mandatory human rights-based training and guidance for both mainstream and special schools as proposed by Parent Action and its parent carers.

## **7. Restrictive practice, seclusion and restraint - Departmental briefing**

The Committee noted a briefing paper from the Department of Education.

The following witnesses joined the meeting by video conference at 12:03 pm:

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

Ms Julie Humphries, Head of Additional Educational Needs Team, Department of Education

Shauna Collinson – Interim Assistant Director (EA), Pupil Inclusion, Wellbeing and Protection

Andrea Kelly – Head of Primary Behaviour & Support Provisions, Education Authority (EA)

The officials briefed the Committee on the use of restraint and seclusion in schools.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked witnesses for the briefing.

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

- Asking for the rationale for its inaction on this matter given that jurisdictions in England and Scotland have already taken action;
- Asking for a timeline for banning some of these practices delivering new guidance and rolling out training;
- Asking what interim guidance has been issued given the urgency of this matter;
- Asking what action was taken by the Department when the Chairperson raised this matter with the Minister in February 2020;
- Asking it to communicate to schools that guidance is out of date;
- Asking it to provide an engagement plan and timetable of deliverables for the working group and reference group on these matters, and the terms of reference for the work of the reference group; and

- Asking if the Department declined in January 2020 to join a Department of Health review on restraint and seclusion policy, who took that decision and on what basis was the decision made.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority praising its work on the Wholeschool nurture approach, de-escalation training, emotional communication training, early intervention, preventative and recommending that these are rewarded and that accredited CPD hours are awarded to encourage and prioritise these approaches. The Committee agreed to ask EA how it might provide infrastructure for common, central recording and monitoring of instances of restraint and seclusion in schools, and for dissemination of guidance and resources about this. The Committee also agreed to ask the Education Authority for further information on its response to and actions following a 2017 response to a BBC freedom of information request.

## **8. Correspondence**

8.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

8.2 The Committee noted a Call for Evidence on the Protection from Stalking Bill from the Committee for Justice.

8.3 The Committee noted correspondence from the Principal of Fleming Fulton School regarding concerns about the vaccination of staff in special schools.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Minister seeking an update on programmes to test and vaccinate staff in special schools including the timescale in which vaccinations will take place.

8.4 The Committee noted correspondence from an individual regarding concerns regarding Covid-19 Safety at School Gates.

8.5 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education on funding the Neuronimo Programme being delivered by the Reverse the Trend Foundation.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to forward the response to the Reverse the Trend Foundation.

8.6 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education on the impact of the pandemic on access to special educational needs support for vulnerable children.

8.7 The Committee noted is an update from Department of Education on the COVID-19 Childcare Temporary Closure Fund.

8.8 The Committee noted a copy of a response from the Minister of Education to Northern Ireland Teachers Council regarding staff within special schools.

8.9 The Committee noted a response from the Mental Health Champion setting out proposals for a Summer Programme for Children and Young People.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to Forward this to Department of Education seeking its views on the proposals and to copy the letter to the Department of Health and the Department for Communities.

8.10 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education on compensatory payments to exam contractors.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to forward the response to the correspondent who raised this matter.

8.11 The Committee noted correspondence about payments to invigilators.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to forward the response received from the Department of Education on this matter to the correspondent who raised this matter.

8.12 The Committee noted a briefing paper from Department of Education to the Committee for the Economy on the 14-19 Strategy. Members noted that this was originally scheduled to be a joint briefing however due to the Education's Committee's current workload, it had agreed to take this briefing at a later date.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to seek to remain updated on the strategy and to reschedule the briefing.

8.13 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education confirming that a new teachers' payroll IT system would provide all payslips to teachers in electronic format only.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to forward the response to the correspondent who raised this matter.

8.14 The Committee noted correspondence from the Public Accounts Committee enclosing its forward work programme.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to invite NIAO to brief it on its report, Financial Health of Schools.

8.15 The Committee noted correspondence regarding the Post Primary transfer process.

8.16 The Committee noted correspondence from the Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS) providing a copy of its Report entitled – 'A Call for Change: Time for Action. Meeting the needs of pupils with Special Educational Needs in Catholic maintained schools'.

8.17 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Executive Office providing Hansard for a briefing it had with Northern Ireland Youth Forum on 17 February 2021 entitled 'Our Voices: Speaking Truth to Power'.

## **9. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed its forward work programme.

## **9. Any Other Business**

The Committee noted correspondence from Department of Education notifying an imminent Written Statement from the Minister on the phased return of pupils to schools from 8 March 2021.

Members discussed the proposed schedule for pupils to return to school.

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

The next formal Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 3 March 2021 by video conference at 9:30 am.

*The meeting was adjourned at 1:34 pm*

**Mr Chris Lyttle MLA  
Chairperson, Committee for Education  
3 March 2021**