



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 27 JANUARY 2021

Video Conference

Present by Video Conference:

Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Ms Nicola Brogan MLA
Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Justin McNulty MLA

Apologies: Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA

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 9:36am in public session.

1. Apologies

Apologies as above.

2. Chairperson's Business

2.1 Committee meetings

The Committee noted correspondence from Committee and Members Support team regarding restrictions on attendance at Committee meeting during the covid-19 lockdown.

2.2 Department of Education response - Covid-19 restrictions: impact on Youth Organisations

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education on the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on Youth Organisations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to the youth organisations that briefed it at its meeting on Wednesday 13 January seeking their views.

2.3 Post-primary transfer tests

The Committee considered a response from the Department on Post primary transfer tests.

Mr Bradley joined the meeting at 9:44am

Mr McCrossan joined the meeting at 9:45am

2.4 Committee motion

The Chairperson thanked members for their contributions to the Committee motion on the Adverse Impact of the Pandemic on Access to Special Educational Needs Support for Vulnerable Children that was debated by the Assembly.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department:

- seeking an update on the establishment of a vulnerable Child reference group;
- asking what funding has been made available for a programme for Special Schools comparable to the Engage programme; and
- an update on the prioritisation of vaccination for Special School staff.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to register public interest in and inquire as to the progress of any scoping work by the Department on the viability of allowing pupils to repeat an academic year due to the covid-19 pandemic.

The Chairperson noted that the Deputy Chairperson was moving from the Committee, and thanked her for her service, dedication and contribution to the work of the Committee.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 20 January 2021.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Budget – Departmental briefing

The Committee noted briefing papers from Department of Education and the Construction Employers Federation.

The following witnesses joined the meeting by video conference at 9:57am:

Mr Gary Fair, Director of Finance, Department of Education

Mr Stephen Van Houten, Deputy Finance Director, Department of Education

Mr Philip Irwin, Director of Investment and Infrastructure, Department of Education

The witnesses briefed the Committee on the 2020-2021 budget.

Mr Humphrey joined the meeting at 10:08 am.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Bradley left the meeting at 10:42am.

The Chairperson thanked officials for the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on some questions which arose in the session including:

- To confirm the estimate given of how this year's pressures compare to those in previous years in light of additional covid funding;
- for information on departmental proposals to reduce transport costs and how this can be achieved without imposing additional costs on people who live in rural areas;
- whether it is proposed to use central covid monies before end year to address digital inequality by improving wifi infrastructure in rural schools and enable roll-out of Seesaw remote learning subscriptions to all schools;
- confirmation that the Department was reporting no under or overspends; and
- seeking that the Department continue to keep the Committee informed on its in-year monitoring process in a timely manner.

6. Remote and Blended Learning – BlendED NI briefing

The Committee noted a briefing paper from BlendED NI.

The following witnesses joined the meeting by video conference at 11:03am:

Ms Karen Irwin, P2 Head Teacher of UICT, Ballyclare Primary School

Ms Nicole O'Connor, P3 Head Teacher of UICT, St Colmcille's Primary School / Nursery Unit

Ms Louise Kerr, Post Primary Teacher Head of History / Digital Technology Leader, St Joseph's College

Mr Michael O'Kane, Principal, St Colmcille's Primary School / Nursery Unit

Ms Pamela Algie, Principal, Bangor Central Nursery Unit

Mr Alistair Hamill, Post Primary Teacher, Head of Geography & Senior Leadership Team, Lurgan College

Mr John O'Boyle, Member, Goliath Trust

The witnesses briefed the Committee on remote and blended learning.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked witnesses for the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority supporting proposals to roll out Seesaw to all schools including Special Schools and nursery and asking for an update on this.

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

- asking what plans there are to address digital inequality and support parents and grandparents to use resources for blended learning;
- suggesting that digital learning be incorporated into teacher training;

- referring the proposal of BlendEd that the Department provide a central digital portal as part of a wider Digital Strategy;
- represent to the Department the view of BlendEd that existing remote learning materials are reviewed for fitness of purpose to meet the needs of pupils, teachers and parents and with adequate range to cater to nursery, primary and special schools;
- suggesting that partners in creative learning charities could work together with the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations & Assessment (CCEA) and C2K to provide classroom based practice.

7. Remote and Blended Learning - Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) briefing

The Committee noted briefing papers from the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

The following witnesses joined the meeting by video conference at 12:19pm:

Ms Faustina Graham, Chief Inspector, Education and Training Inspectorate

Mr Raymond Caldwell, Assistant Chief Inspector, Education and Training Inspectorate

Ms Heather Jackson, Managing Inspector (Primary), Education and Training Inspectorate

Ms Gillian Boyd, Managing Inspector (Special Education), Education and Training Inspectorate

Ms Sinéad McKenna, Managing Inspector (Post primary), Education and Training Inspectorate

The witnesses briefed the Committee on remote and blended learning.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked officials for the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the ETI:

- Requesting a timeline for the ETI's proposed actions in respect of assessing and remedying lost learning;
- Seeking clarity on the adequacy of the District Inspector model and the range of performance, curriculum and emotional wellbeing indicators that are currently not being assessed during the period of covid-19 lockdown;
- Seeking an update on the ETI review on Physical Education;
- Seeking information on the expansion of outdoor learning, particularly with older children;
- Seeking an update on the impact of the engage programme in mitigating the effects of school closures; and
- Seeking information on the delivery of remote learning to children with Special Educational Needs and any areas of good practice.

8. Correspondence

8.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

8.2 The Committee considered correspondence regarding a legislative timetable in regard to school starting age flexibility.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Department of Education seeking an updated position and timeframe on bringing forward legislation regarding School Starting age flexibility.

8.3 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education regarding the Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties Cancellation (No.19) Notice 2021, the Coronavirus Act 2020 Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.20) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2021 and the Temporary Modification of Education Duties (No.21) Notice (Northern Ireland) 2021.

8.4 The Committee noted correspondence about school safety during the covid-19 pandemic.

8.5 The Committee considered correspondence highlighting the need to begin planning post-primary curriculum for 2022.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Department of Education asking what curriculum planning are they putting in place for post-primary in 2022 given the fact that so much learning has been lost during 2021.

8.6 The Committee considered correspondence from the Minister of Education providing a copy of the report produced by Deloitte MSC on the Review of Alternative Awarding Arrangements 2020 setting out key issues and lessons learnt from the 2020 process.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to CCEA asking that they address the key actions from this report during their briefing on 10 Feb and provide an update on the development of an action plan to address the key issues in the development of alternative awarding arrangements for 2021.

8.7 The Committee noted correspondence from Barnardo's about a new online Hub that it has launched to promote staff and pupil wellbeing by using trauma-informed approaches.

8.8 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education to concerns raised by Children's Law Centre about the Post-Primary Transfer Test.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to Children's Law Centre.

8.9 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence to the Minister of Education regarding concerns about vaccinating teachers before those with medical conditions.

8.10 The Committee noted correspondence regarding SR 2021 No. 12 The Prohibition of Waiting (Schools) Order (Northern Ireland) 2021.

8.11 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Minister for the Economy to CCEA regarding Vocational Qualifications & Essential Skills and alternative awarding arrangements for remainder of the 20/21 Academic Year.

9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reschedule briefings from the Integrated Education Fund and UNESCO Education Centre.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite Healthy Kidz to brief it at its meeting on 17 February 2021.

10. Any Other Business

The Committee discussed the recent decision to decision to remove WJEC qualifications from the approved list available to Northern Ireland learners.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister seeking clarity on reasons for this decision and its impact on pupils.

11. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next formal Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 3 February 2021 in the Senate Chamber and by video conference at 9:30 am.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:15 pm.

**Mr Chris Lyttle MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
3 February 2020**