



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 21 OCTOBER 2020

Room 29 and Video Conference, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Robbie Butler MLA (Item 1 Only)
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA

Present by Video Conference:

Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mr Robbie Butler MLA (Item 2 Only)
Ms Catherine Kelly MLA
Mr William Humphrey MLA
Mr Justin McNulty MLA

Apologies: Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)
Ms Paula Best (Clerical Supervisor)

The meeting commenced at 9:21am in closed session.

1. Governance Issues Relating to Special Educational Needs Statementing - Education Authority – oral briefing

The Committee noted a restricted briefing paper from the Education Authority.

Mr Humphrey joined the meeting at 9:23am

Mr McNulty joined the meeting at 9:35am.

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

Ms Sharon O'Connor, Chairperson, Board of the Education Authority; and

Dr Andy McMorrان, Member, Board of the Education Authority.

The witnesses briefed the Committee on governance issues relating to the Special Educational Needs (SEN) statutory assessment or statementing process.

Mr Newton joined the meeting at 9:48am.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Butler made a declaration of interest that Dr McMorran had been appointed to the Education Authority Board by the Ulster Unionist Party.

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.

Mr Butler left the meeting at 11:22am.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for the briefing.

Proceedings were suspended at 11:23am.

Proceedings resumed at 11:37am with Mr Lyttle, and Mr Newton present in Room 29 and Ms Mullan, Mr Bradley, Mr Humphrey, Ms Kelly, and Mr McNulty present by videoconference.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking sight of the lessons learned report generated following the consultation on proposed changes to Early Years pre-school provision in 2015-16.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) indicating its support for an independent inquiry in respect of governance at the Education Authority. The Committee further agreed to write to PAC suggesting, as part of its current review of SEN, the consideration of lines of enquiry relating to Departmental guidance to board members of Arm's Length Bodies; and current arrangements in respect of external appointees to the Education Authority who are understood to be undertaking related investigatory processes.

Mr Butler rejoined the meeting at 11:43am.

Proceedings continued in public session from 11:44am.

The Committee adopted a revised order for agenda items.

2. Impact of covid 19 - National Autistic Society NI and Evangelical Alliance NI – oral briefing

The following witnesses joined the meeting in person at 11:44am.

Mr David Smyth, Head, Evangelical Alliance Northern Ireland.

Ms Donna Jennings, Church and Mission Coordinator, Evangelical Alliance Northern Ireland.

The following witness joined the meeting by video conference at 11:44am:

Ms Shirelle Stewart, Director, National Autistic Society NI.

The witnesses briefed the Committee on the impact of lockdown and restart on children with autism and with other Special Educational Needs.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Humphrey left meeting at 12:10pm.

Mr Butler left the meeting at 12:22pm.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education, indicating: its concern at the loss of respite facilities when schools closed; surprise that lessons learned in the first covid-19 lockdown had not been applied to the current closure of schools in respect of vulnerable children; and alarm at the apparent lack of understanding of the needs of children and young people with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

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

- urging it to issue guidance and support to schools in respect of children with respirative health issues;
- asking it to explain why the multi-disciplinary approach has failed to address the needs of ASD children and young people as well as children with special needs and challenging behaviours; and
- urging it to consult meaningfully with school principals in order to determine the support that they need to facilitate ASD children and young people.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister asking how he is to work with the Minister of Health in order to address administrative issues and make imaginative use of departmental and other facilities in order to support ASD children and young people.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority urging it to provide respite facilities and to work creatively with the Department of Education, the Department of Health, and the Department for Communities in order to make best use of community and departmental facilities and support.

3. Correspondence

3.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

3.2 The Committee noted a response from the Education Authority regarding the timetable for post-primary transfer and declining to provide details of the associated costs.

3.3 The Committee considered a response from the Department of Education on post-primary transfer.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department suggesting that the information on preferences and acceptances by schools be put into the public domain in order to inform parental choice.

3.4 The Committee noted correspondence from a parent relating to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) assessment and curriculum consultation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Committee's response to the consultation to the correspondent.

3.5 The Committee noted correspondence from a teacher relating to the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) assessment and curriculum consultation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Committee's response to the consultation to the correspondent.

3.6 The Committee noted a copy of a letter from a concerned parent to the Minister indicating concerns in respect of face coverings.

3.7 The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual on the recording of pupil absences by schools during the covid-19 pandemic.

3.8 The Committee noted correspondence including a link to the Department of Education's Annual Report and Accounts for 2019-20.

3.9 The Committee noted correspondence including a link to the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland's Annual Report and Accounts 2018-19.

3.10 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education in respect of the independent evaluation of the Curriculum Sports Programme.

3.11 The Committee considered an invitation to the Chairperson to attend a Girlguiding Ulster Zoom event on 4 November 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to participate in the event on behalf of the Committee, diary permitting.

3.12 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education on the expert panel on persistent educational underachievement.

3.13 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education including a notice made under the Coronavirus Act in respect of Free School Meals alternatives during the period of extension to the Halloween break.

4. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a draft Forward Work Programme

Agreed: The Committee agreed to give further consideration to issuing a call for evidence relating to covid-19 matters in order to inform potential special reports on this subject.

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was content with its Forward Work Programme, as amended.

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education on the progress of the Children and Young People's Strategy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to make an interim written response to the Department of Education in respect of the Children and Young People's Strategy indicating that it was content, on a without prejudice basis, for the Strategy to be progressed to the Executive.

5. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

6. Chairperson's Business

6.1 Informal meeting with Angel Eyes

The Chairperson reminded the Committee that Members had met informally with representatives of Angel Eyes on Tuesday 19 October 2020 and that a note of the informal proceedings had been circulated.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority asking a number of questions relating to services provided to visually impaired children and young people.

6.2 Delay to Autumn Exam Series

The Chairperson advised the Committee that during Question Time, the Minister had referred to a delay to the autumn examination series owing to the longer than expected Halloween break. Press reports had clarified that the autumn exam series was to be delayed by 2 weeks.

6.3 School Attendance

The Chairperson advised the Committee that during Question Time, the Minister had indicated that school pupil attendance was around 93.7% with 1491 individual covid-19 cases which appeared to include 352 teachers and staff.

7. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 14 October 2020.

8. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

9. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

10. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 4 November 2020 in Room 29, Parliament Buildings and by video conference at 9:00am.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:19pm.

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