



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 4 MARCH 2020

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Mr William Humphrey MLA
Ms Catherine Kelly MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Justin McNulty MLA
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA

Apologies:

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Ian McAdam (Clerical Supervisor)
Mr Ed McCann (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 10.18am in open session.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

2.1 Education Authority – SEN Statementing - Informal meeting

The Chairperson reminded Members, that as agreed, he along with Mr Newton and Mr Humphrey had met informally with officials from the Education Authority on Thursday 27 February 2020 in order to discuss the internal audit of practice in respect of SEN statementing. In response to the informal briefing, the Chairperson had sought the formal oral briefing from the Education Authority Chief Executive which had been included in this week's agenda.

2.2 Department of Education – “gatekeeping” issues

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Education Authority had advised that the Department had lately obliged it to route all responses and papers through the Department that are intended for the Committee. This had led to some delays and misunderstandings relating to responses from the Education Authority.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister, seeking an explanation of the reasons underpinning this new “gatekeeping” process for the Education Authority.

Agreed: The Committee further agreed to review the response and give consideration as to whether it would recommend to the Minister that the new “gatekeeping” process be discontinued.

2.3 National Children’s Bureau (NCB) Scoping Report – emotional health and well-being

The Chairperson reminded the Committee that the Department had now published the NCB scoping report on the need for a mental health and emotional wellbeing framework and had forwarded it to the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite NCB to provide it with an oral briefing on the scoping report.

2.4 UNESCO Education Centre report

The Chairperson advised Members of the publication of the UNESCO Education Centre Report on the certificate of religious education.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the UNESCO Education Centre to brief on its report on the certificate of religious education.

2.5 Meeting with the Children’s Law Centre

The Chairperson reminded the Committee that an informal meeting with the Children’s Law Centre had been arranged for Tuesday 10 March 2020.

2.6 Concurrent meeting with the Committee for the Economy

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee was to undertake a concurrent meeting with the Committee for the Economy on the 14-19 Strategy.

Agreed: The Committee formally agreed to hold a concurrent session with the Committee for the Economy on Wednesday 18 March 2020 on the subject of the 14-19 strategy and, diaries permitting, to have Mr Chris Lyttle MLA act as chairperson and Dr Caoimhe Archibald MLA act as deputy chairperson for this session.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meetings held on 26 February 2020.

4. Matters Arising

Members recorded considerable and growing disquiet among school principals regarding the absence of relevant and up-to-date guidance regarding coronavirus. Members referred to numerous schools which are about to undertake foreign travel and have raised urgent queries.

Members also sought clarity, on behalf of schools, regarding which government organisations are responsible for providing advice to schools in respect of the above and other coronavirus containment issues.

Finally, Members sought clarity as to the circumstances in which deep cleans in schools will be required and whether the Department will cover the associated cleaning and other related closure costs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking urgent clarity for schools in respect of the provision of coronavirus guidance including the management of relevant school trips and cost issues relating to these and to containment measures.

5. Education Authority - Internal Audit Report on SEN Statementing – Evidence Session

The Committee noted a briefing paper on the Internal Audit Report from the Education Authority on the statutory assessment process for Special Educational Needs.

The following officials joined the meeting at 10.33am

Ms Sara Long, Chief Executive, Education Authority.

Ms Donna Allen, Assistant Director, Pupil Services and Procurement, Education Authority.

Ms Cynthia Currie, Head of Transformation, Education Authority.

The evidence session was reported by Hansard.

Officials briefed the Committee on its internal audit report on SEN Statementing.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

12:38pm Mr Humphrey left the meeting.

The Chairperson thanked officials for their attendance.

12:50pm Mr McCrossan left the meeting

12:50pm Proceedings were temporarily suspended.

12:54pm Proceedings resumed with the following Members in attendance: Mr Lyttle; Ms Mullan; Mr Bradley; Mr Butler; Ms Kelly; Mr McNulty; and Mr Newton.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the chairperson of the Education Authority Board inviting her, along with the chairpersons of the Education Authority Children and Young People's Services Committee and the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee, to provide oral evidence to the Committee for Education regarding the governance issues which the internal audit had set out.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority:

- seeking a further oral briefing and a written response on the key timescales for and details of the new statutory assessment performance framework;
- seeking an explanation as to how the Education Authority is to revise and improve its culture;
- seeking details of the Education Authority's plans to engage with parents in respect of the failings in the SEN statutory assessment process;
- seeking a breakdown on the differing performances of the 5 SEN statutory assessment offices; and
- suggesting that a review of the educational psychology service allocation process also be undertaken.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the Minister and the Permanent Secretary to brief the Committee on the Department's response to the internal audit report and to set out:

- whether a wide-ranging independent review of the Education Authority's culture and processes is required
- the legal and other consequences for the breaches of the statutory timescales and the consequences for those individuals who have apparently facilitated this; and
- how the Department is to improve interaction between education and Health and Social Care Trusts including progress on the SEN Education and Health Interfaces Project Board and the Notification, Referral and Statutory Assessment Project.

Agreed: The Committee agreed an amended press statement.

6. Department of Education / Education Authority - Shared Education - Oral Briefing

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer the oral briefing on Shared Education.

7. Correspondence

7.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

7.2 The Committee noted information on research carried out by BookTrust NI.

7.3 The Committee discussed an Education Authority response on guidelines in relation to the framework for pupil work experience.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write again to the Education Authority seeking further information on changes to the framework for pupil work experience.

7.4 The Committee noted a response from the Education Authority providing information on its Customer Service Charter.

7.5 The Committee noted a Strategic Investment Board Investing Activity Report for the Department of Education for February 2020.

7.6 The Committee noted a response from Parenting NI regarding school starting age flexibility.

7.7 The Committee discussed correspondence from Ulster University regarding its report on teachers' attitudes to digital skills.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing from Ulster University on its report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to also schedule a briefing from mTech academy.

7.8 The Committee discussed a letter from Employers for Childcare seeking to brief the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite Employers for Childcare to provide an oral briefing.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to invite the Department to brief it on changes to pre-school entitlement.

7.9 The Committee noted a response from the Department providing a copy of the NCB scoping review report relating to emotional health and well-being.

7.10 The Committee considered a memo from the Assembly's EU affairs manager on the Interparliamentary Forum on Brexit.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on the impact of Brexit for education and in particular in respect of the ongoing and future funding for cross-border Shared Education projects.

7.11 The Committee noted a Departmental response regarding the work of the Tackling Educational Disadvantage Team.

7.12 The Committee considered an invitation from St Dympna's Primary School, Dromore, Co Tyrone to see the school's work on nurture provision.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to arrange a visit to St Dympna's Primary School.

8. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted a revised forward work programme.

9. Any Other Business

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on the guidance provided to schools on hosting political hustings and the level of compliance with that guidance.

The Committee again noted with concern reported developments in Italy regarding potential school closures owing to the coronavirus.

10. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next meeting will be held on Wednesday 11 March 2020 at 9.45am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 1.17pm.

Mr Chris Lyttle MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
11 March 2020