



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 11 MARCH 2020

Room 30, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
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: Mr Maurice Bradley MLA

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 9.59am in open session.

1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

2. Chairperson's Business

2.1 Coronavirus

The Chairperson reminded Members of the Minister's response to an urgent oral question in respect of measures to contain the coronavirus including consideration of the re-scheduling of examinations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education and the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) seeking information on coronavirus contingency plans including the circumstances under

which GCSE, A-level and other formal examinations would be rescheduled or postponed.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Department seeking responses at the oral briefing on 18 March 2020 in respect of coronavirus, in particular as to those matters previously raised by the Committee and also as to whether the Minister is to establish: an education working group as is the case in other jurisdictions; and a specific education helpline which will address questions about which there is limited clarity e.g. in respect of children or teachers with symptoms or the response in Special Schools.

Mr Butler joined the meeting at 10:09am.

2.2 Post-Primary Transfer

The Chairperson advised Members of complaints from parents and schools regarding post-primary transfer examination arrangements. Members noted that post-primary transfer tests are currently not regulated by the Department.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite GL Assessment Ltd; the Post Primary Transfer Consortium (PPTC) and the Association for Quality Education to give oral evidence to the Committee regarding current post-primary transfer examination arrangements.

2.3 Concurrent meeting

The Chairperson reminded Members that the next Committee meeting would include a briefing from the Minister on SEN Statementing issues and the coronavirus. The meeting would be followed by a concurrent meeting of the Committee for Education and the Committee for the Economy in order to consider a joint briefing from the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy on the 14-19 Strategy.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meetings held on 4 March 2020.

4. Matters Arising

The Committee discussed the recently applied Departmental process under which the Education Authority is required to route all responses and papers through the Department that are intended for the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it found the Departmental process in respect of Education Authority papers to be unsatisfactory and that it would seek clarity from the Minister on this matter at the oral briefing on 18 March 2020.

5. Special Schools - Education Authority / Strategic Leadership Group - Oral Briefing

The Committee noted a briefing paper on Special Schools from the Education Authority and Strategic Leadership Group.

The following officials joined the meeting at 10.17am:

Miss Paula Jordan, Principal Sperrinview Special School, Strategic Leadership Group;

Ms Barbara Spence, Principal Brookfield Special School, Strategic Leadership Group;

Ms Sharon Tennant, Principal Sandleford Special School, Strategic Leadership Group; and

Ms Kim Scott, Assistant Director, Education, Education Authority.

Officials briefed the Committee on issues relating to Special Schools.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Butler made a declaration of interest that his daughter is studying learning disability nursing.

The Chairperson thanked officials for their attendance.

6. Special Educational Needs Framework - Department of Education - Oral Briefing

The Committee noted a briefing paper on the Special Educational Needs Framework from the Department of Education.

The following officials joined the meeting at 12.18pm:

Mr Ricky Irwin, Director, Inclusion and Wellbeing, Department of Education; and

Ms Sharon Lawlor, Head of Special Education and Inclusion Review Team, Department of Education.

Officials provided the Committee with an overview of the Special Educational Needs Framework.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr McCrossan left the meeting at 1:03pm.

Mr Lyttle left the meeting and Ms Mullan assumed the role of chairperson at 1.11pm.

Mr Humphrey left the meeting at 1:13pm.

Mr Lyttle rejoined the meeting and resumed the role of chairperson at 1:14pm.

The Chairperson thanked officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking further information as to the reasons underpinning the increase in Special School enrolments and the projected enrolment pressures in future years. The Committee also agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking:

- sight of the Special School staffing formula and workforce plan;
- sight of the Education Authority's plan and budget for Special School staff training and development;
- sight of the Education Authority's Special Schools accommodation needs plan;
- sight of the "Dr Hunter report";
- information on the Education Authority's plans to make use of learning in other jurisdictions including the Carpenter and Rochford reports; and
- sight of the Education Authority's policy on restraint, seclusion and restrictive practice.

Agreed: The Committee further agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking sight of its coronavirus contingency plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity in respect of the School Enhancement Programme (SEP) and reported restrictions on its use in supporting new health related provision in Special Schools as well as a summary of average SEP timescales. Additionally the Committee agreed to seek an explanation from the Department as to the absence of a schedule of accommodation for Special Schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking information as to how it is to improve co-operation with health in providing support for Special Schools including addressing the reported absence of a direct referral mechanism for Special Schools for health-based support.

Mr Butler left the meeting at 1:23pm

Mr McCrossan rejoined the meeting at 1:24pm

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking:

- clarity as to the consequences for the Education Authority and Health and Social Care Trusts if statutory timescales are exceeded under the new Framework, including where this is owing to lack of resources by the Health and Social Care Trusts.
- information on equivalent statutory timescales in other jurisdictions;
- sight of the Department's SEN Learner Journey communication recommendations for the Education Authority including the introduction of electronic sharing and enhanced contacts with parents, children and schools; and

- clarity on the timescales for the consultation and commencement of relevant SEN Framework provisions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking an update on its reported review of Autistic Spectrum Disorder policy and reported changes to exceptional teaching arrangements.

7. Correspondence

Mr McCrossan left the meeting at 1:26pm.

7.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

7.2 The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned parent regarding restraint, seclusion and restrictive practice in Special Schools.

7.3 The Committee noted correspondence from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding procedures and practices for the budget process.

7.4 The Committee deferred consideration of a response from the Department regarding holiday hunger.

7.5 The Committee noted a response from the Education Authority on reducing the stigma and increasing the uptake of Free School Meals.

7.6 The Committee noted a response from the Department providing information on the Strule Shared Education Campus Programme and ongoing related projects.

7.7 The Committee deferred consideration of a response from the Department on the current Programme for Government outcomes viewer and the education dashboard.

7.8 The Committee deferred consideration of a response from the Department on children excluded from GCSE statistics.

7.9 The Committee noted a response from the Department providing information on Extended Schools and the Partners in Education programmes.

7.10 The Committee noted a response from the Department on previous practice and future plans for Voluntary Exit Schemes (VES).

7.11 The Committee deferred consideration of correspondence from Action for Children NI seeking a meeting with the Committee.

7.12 The Committee deferred consideration of a response from the Education Authority on Youth Sector Provision.

7.13 The Committee deferred consideration of a letter from Armagh, Banbridge, Craigavon Primary Principals Group regarding the Addressing Bullying in Schools legislation.

7.14 The Committee deferred consideration of correspondence from Parent Action regarding concerns relating to the Public Health Agency and Education Authority.

7.15 The Committee noted a response from the Minister on Special Educational Needs statements.

7.16 The Committee noted a response from the Education Authority on the use of the Contingency Fund.

7.17 The Committee noted a response from the Education Authority regarding current guidance on sugar in food.

8. Forward Work Programme

The Committee deferred consideration of its forward work programme.

9. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

10. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next meeting will be held on Wednesday 18 March 2020 at 9.45am in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:26pm.

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