



Northern Ireland
Assembly
Committee for Education
MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS
WEDNESDAY 2 SEPTEMBER 2015
SENATE CHAMBER, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

Present:

Peter Weir MLA (Chairperson)
Sandra Overend MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Jonathan Craig MLA
Ross Hussey MLA
Trevor Lunn MLA
Nelson McCausland MLA
Maeve McLaughlin MLA
Robin Newton MLA
Seán Rogers MLA

In Attendance:

Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Paul Stitt (Assistant Clerk)
Paula Best (Clerical Supervisor)
Kevin Marks (Clerical Officer)

Apologies:

Chris Hazzard MLA

The meeting commenced in public session at 1.00pm.

1. Apologies

Apologies are as indicated above.

2. Chairperson's Business

2.1 Examination Results

The Chairperson recorded the Committee's congratulations to pupils, teachers, schools and parents throughout Northern Ireland following the results of the recent GCSE and A-Level examinations.

2.2 Congratulations

The Chairperson recorded the Committee's congratulations to Chris Hazzard MLA on the birth of his daughter on 26 August 2015.

2.3 Informal meeting with senior Departmental officials

The Chairperson advised the Committee that he had undertaken an informal meeting with Departmental officials in Rathgael House on 1 September 2015 to discuss the Committee's priorities for the 2015-16 session.

2.4 Reports

The Committee noted the following reports that had been laid in the Business Office during the summer:

- Department of Education Resource Account 2014-15;
- Teacher's Superannuation Scheme Statement 2015;
- Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) 2014-15 Annual Report;
- Comhairle na Gaelscolaíochta (CnaG) 2014-15 Annual Report;
- Northern Ireland Commission for Integrated Education (NICIE) 2014-15 Directors' Report and Financial Statement; and
- Ofqual 2012-2014 Report on the regulation of vocational qualifications in Northern Ireland

The Committee also noted that it had received copies of the following reports:

- Education and Training Inspectorate Disposal of Records Schedule; and
- General Teaching Council Northern Ireland (GTCNI) Record Retention and Disposal Schedule.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek further information, in respect of these reports, by writing to the Department of Education seeking information on:

- school and non-school-based staff redundancies;
- commentary in the CCEA annual report in respect of possible in-year budget cuts;
- reported governance issues in GTCNI;
- the high level criteria to which new GCSE and A-Level specifications are to comply;
- the Primary Counselling options paper;
- the Digital Technology Strategy;
- Arms Length Body oversight guidance;
- progress in respect of Departmental medium term efficiency plans identified in the Stormont House Agreement; and
- the retention period for school inspection evidence.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking information on the summer camps project and governance of Special Educational Needs (SEN) spending in the former Belfast Education and Library Board area.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to CCEA:

- asking that, in addition to Levels of Progression (and the use of CCEA analytics and system performance measurement); Computer Based Assessment; and the review of GCSE and A-Level specifications, it also briefs in October on: staffing issues; the independent Board Effectiveness

- Review; and Information Commission complaints referenced in its annual report; and
- seeking clarification as to the impact on vocational qualifications of the replacement of the Qualifications and Credit Framework and as to whether Northern Ireland is to participate in the new GCSE National Reference Test.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed to write to CnaG asking in respect of the reported “widespread and very significant failings in the systems and processes for governance” referenced in its annual report, to set out the associated Action Plan and clarify the funding position.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to NICIE seeking clarification as to the reference in its annual directors’ report to the realignment of “its strategic direction to DE’s priorities” and in respect of the restructuring of the Club Bank debt which has led “to the amounts outstanding of £9,558,053 being waived.”

3. Minutes of previous meeting

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 1 July 2015.

4. Matters Arising

4.1 Elective Home Education

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an oral briefing from Home Education NI on Elective Home Education.

4.2 Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Bill

The Committee noted additional correspondence from Autism NI; the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission; the Children’s Disability Strategic Alliance; the National Association of Schoolmasters and Union of Women Teachers; and the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) in respect of the secondary legislation associated with the SEND Bill.

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education enclosing a copy of the Keeling Schedule with annotations.

The Committee noted a response from the Department of Health, Social Services and Public safety to Committee queries regarding the input of Health and Social Care Trusts to the assessment of children with SEN and the Early Intervention Transformation Programme.

The Committee noted 2 responses from the Department of Education providing further detail on aspects of the SEND Bill.

The Committee also noted that Departmental revisions to the clause by clause table for the SEND Bill were now available on SkyDrivePro.

1.20pm Seán Rogers and Maeve McLaughlin joined the meeting.

5. School uniform – written briefing

The Committee noted an updated Assembly Research paper on the subject of school uniform.

Agreed: The Committee noted with concern the costs to parents associated with school uniform and agreed to write to the Department seeking information on:

- the level of up-take for the Clothing Allowances Scheme for 2015-16; and
- the actions the Department is to take in order to ensure that schools are encouraged to minimise school uniform cost by including the use of generic, non-branded material and improve retailer choice.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue a press release highlighting its concerns in respect of the cost of school uniforms.

6. Draft End of Session Report 2014-15 – written briefing

The Committee noted the draft End of Session Report for the period 1 September 2014 to 31 August 2015.

7. Correspondence

7.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

7.2 The Committee noted correspondence from the Speaker enclosing a copy of the public petition relating to the Early Years Fund that was laid in the Assembly on Tuesday 30 June 2015.

7.3 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education regarding the Early Years Pathway Fund.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a briefing from the Department on the Early Years Pathway Fund.

7.4 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education regarding Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for teachers and the cancellation of the Summer School for teachers previously organised by the Regional Training Unit (RTU).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking information on how much money has been saved through the cancellation of the RTU Summer School.

7.5 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance and Personnel including an Assembly Research paper on departmental financial forecasting.

7.6 The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Education to Committee queries in relation to tackling excessive school budget surpluses.

The Committee also noted correspondence from the Department on the level of over/under funding of schools and plans in respect of a 100% audit of the annual school census.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking information on the action it is to take in order to address excessive budget surpluses or deficits and clarity in respect of its powers to address these issues.

7.7 The Committee noted correspondence from the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (OFMDFM) in respect of its June Monitoring Round bid for support relating to the Delivering Social Change Literacy and Numeracy Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek an update on funding of the relevant Delivering Social Change programme.

7.8 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister (COFMDFM) regarding its inquiry into the Together: Building a United Community programme

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek clarity as to how/whether it measures the promotion of good relations as part of its policy delivery.

7.9 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education to Committee queries regarding how often oversight powers, in respect of Boards of Governors, have been used by the Education and Library Boards or Education Authority, the Department or other bodies.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and the Education Authority highlighting its dissatisfaction with the response received and requesting further detail on the use of oversight powers in respect of Boards of Governors.

7.10 The Committee noted an invitation from the School of Education, Queen's University Belfast to attend the '4th Centre for Behaviour analysis/QUART Conference Multidisciplinary work in Autism: How can Behaviour Analysis Help' on Friday 6 November 2015.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to attend the event, diary permitting.

7.11 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education enclosing links to the End of Year Report on the DE 2014/15 Business Plan and the DE 2015/16 Business Plan.

7.12 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education in respect of recent reviews of CnaG and NICIE.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department requesting sight of the relevant Action Plans for CnaG and NICIE.

7.13 The Committee noted responses from Stranmillis University College; Queen's University Belfast; St Mary's University College, Belfast and the Department of Education to Committee queries regarding Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers' plans to amend their curricula in respect of the provision of Child Exploitation preventative guidance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking confirmation that all primary school children have access to the NSPCC Preventative Education Programme.

7.14 The Committee noted correspondence from Holy Family Primary and Nursery School enclosing a copy of correspondence to the Education Authority regarding its spending plans.

7.15 The Committee noted an invitation from RTU to the Professional Qualification for Headship Graduation Ceremony on Thursday 15 October 2015.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to attend the event, diary permitting.

7.16 The Committee noted correspondence from Business in the Community to the Deputy Chairperson requesting to brief the Committee on a range of issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an informal briefing from Business in the Community.

7.17 The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned individual in respect of collective worship in schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking sight of its guidance to schools on collective worship.

7.18 The Committee noted a response from the Education Authority to Committee queries regarding the Looked After Children Attach Project Report and the Extended Schools Action Plan report.

7.19 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education to Committee queries in relation to the evaluation of Nurture Units in the Delivering Social Change (DSC) Nurture Unit Project.

7.20 The Committee noted correspondence from an individual regarding the development of an educational product.

7.21 The Committee noted correspondence from Investment Strategy for Northern Ireland enclosing a copy of the July 2015 Procurement Activity Report.

7.22 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education on the use of the Elluminate video-conferencing tool.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the pilot of the Collaborate video-conferencing tool.

7.23 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education providing an update on the implementation of actions relating to the Careers Review Report.

7.24 The Committee noted correspondence from COFMDFM regarding the NI Executive's Strategic EU Priorities for 2015/16.

7.25 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education enclosing updates on the Department of Education Programme for Government (PfG) 2011-15 commitments since March 2015.

7.26 The Committee noted a formal response from the Department of Education to the Committee's position paper on Area Planning.

The Committee also noted correspondence from the chairperson of the Board of Governors of Mitchell House School expressing concerns in respect of the Special School Area Planning draft report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to upload the Departmental response on its position paper to its webpage.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request an oral briefing from the Department on Special School Area Planning and to also request a drafting amendment to the Special School Area Planning draft report deleting reference to a school.

7.27 The Committee noted correspondence from the Education Authority enclosing a copy of the Education Authority Quarterly Equality Screening Report April - June 2015.

7.28 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance and Personnel enclosing the Minister for Finance and Personnel's response to the NIAO Public Sector Sickness Absence Report.

7.29 The Committee noted correspondence from NICCY regarding a proposed meeting involving the UNCRC taskforce and the Chairpersons of the Committees for: the First Minister and deputy First Minister, Education, Justice, Health, Social Services and Public Safety and Social Development.

7.30 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education advising of some changes to school inspection descriptors.

The Committee also noted an invitation to an Education and Training Inspectorate stakeholder event for schools on 14 September 2015.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request an oral briefing from the Department on changes to school inspection descriptors.

7.31 The Committee noted an invitation from Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful to attend an Eco-Schools Reception on Thursday 12 November 2015.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to attend the event, diary permitting.

7.32 The Committee noted an invitation to Committee Members to attend the NI Make Your Mark School Recognition Event on Thursday 10 September 2015.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson and Members to attend the event, diaries permitting.

7.33 The Committee noted an invitation to the Chairperson from the Construction Employers Federation to attend the Construction Excellence Awards 2015 on Thursday 8 October 2015.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Deputy Chairperson to attend the event, diary permitting.

7.34 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education enclosing new guidance for schools on relationships and sexuality and drugs education.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek information on guidelines it has for schools in relation to the abuse of drugs, both legal and illegal, by teachers.

7.35 The Committee noted correspondence from the Education Authority regarding its plans to amend Educational Psychology Services.

8. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its draft forward work programme.

The Committee noted that the Shared and Integrated Education Inquiry Report has been scheduled for plenary debate on Tuesday 8 September 2015.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to receive an oral briefing in closed session from the Department on the draft secondary legislation associated with the SEND Bill.

Agreed: The Committee also agreed not to publish the associated draft secondary legislation as part of its report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to begin the deliberation phase of the Committee Stage of the SEND Bill on 9 September 2015.

9. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

10. Date, Time, Place of Next Meeting

The Committee will meet again on Wednesday 9 September 2015, at 10.00am in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 1.55pm.

Peter Weir
Chairperson, Committee for Education
9 September 2015