



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

Minutes of Proceedings

21 February 2024

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Mr Nick Mathison MLA (Chairperson)

Mr Pat Sheehan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Danny Baker MLA

Mr David Brooks MLA

Ms Cheryl Brownlee MLA

Mr Robbie Butler MLA

Ms Cara Hunter MLA

Mrs Cathy Mason MLA

Ms Kate Nicholl MLA

Ms Aoibhinn Treanor (Assembly Clerk)

Mr Neal Flanagan (Assistant Clerk)

Mr Jim Nulty (Clerical Supervisor)

Mr Joshua Devlin (Clerical Officer)



Northern Ireland Assembly

The meeting commenced at 2:04 pm in public session.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson informed members that he and the Deputy Chairperson had held an informal meeting with the Minister and gave a precis of the discussion.

The Chairperson informed members that he had been asked to sponsor a Unison event regarding free school meals.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chair should sponsor the Unison event in his capacity as an individual MLA.

3. Draft Minutes of Proceedings

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 14 February 2024.

The Committee moved to closed session at 2.08 pm.

4. Treatment of Subordinate Legislation

The Chairperson referred members to a briefing paper from the Examiner of Statutory Rules and to the First Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.



Northern Ireland Assembly

The Chairperson informed members that the Examiner of Statutory Rules had been required to postpone her planned attendance at the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer an invitation to the Examiner of Statutory Rules until it next considers delegated legislation.

The meeting moved to public session at 2.13 pm.

5. SR2023/131 Teachers' Pension Scheme (Remedial Service) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023

Agreed: The Committee considered SR 2023/131 The Teachers' Pension Scheme (Remediable Service) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 and had no objection to the Rule.

6. SR2023/122 Curriculum (Circumstances in which a pupil may be excused from Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Education) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023

Mr Brooks wished it recorded that the DUP regretted the Secretary of State's decision to update the relationship and sexuality education (RSE) curriculum in the absence of a sitting Assembly, and emphasised that his party took a pro-life stance. However, he and his party would not object to the rule.

Ms Nicholl wished it recorded that she felt that the RSE curriculum was not sufficiently progressive and she did not agree with the withdrawal of pupils.

Members shared views on the topic of RSE and discussed the holding of a mini-inquiry on the topic to include curriculum content, the rights of parents, and the rights of teachers to conscientious objection.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to hold a mini-inquiry into relationship and sexuality education and to factor this into timings in forward work planning.



Northern Ireland Assembly

Agreed: The Committee considered SR2023/122 Curriculum (Circumstances in which a pupil may be excused from Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Education) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 and had no objection to the Rule.

Agreed: Members agreed to move to Agenda item 9.

9. Correspondence

9.1 Members noted an index and summary note of correspondence.

9.2 The Committee considered correspondence from the Chairperson of the All-Party Group on Reducing Harm related to Gambling, Mr Philip McGuigan MLA, requesting that the Education Committee write to the Minister to propose he make it a statutory requirement for schools to have in place a gambling education policy, in line with drugs education.

Agreed: The Committee endorsed gambling education and agreed to write to the Department to seek an update on gambling education policy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for Communities to request an update from the Department for Communities on gambling regulation and policy.

9.3 The Committee considered correspondence from Mr Chris Lyttle, Head of Public Affairs at the Irish Football Association, requesting the opportunity for the Irish FA Foundation and Ulster GAA to present to the Committee regarding the decision taken in the absence of a Minister to cease funding to the Department's School Sports Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to extend an invitation to the IFA and GAA to present to the Committee, and to invite Departmental officials to brief the Committee on physical education in schools at the same meeting.

9.4 The Committee considered correspondence from the Construction Employers' Federation welcoming the Minister's announcement that he is to commission a Capital Investment Strategy but expressing concern that funds for the Strule Shared Education Campus and other Shared Education projects are no longer ringfenced.



Northern Ireland Assembly

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department requesting an update on the Strule Shared Education Campus, including a revised timeframe for completion and the current cost estimates of the project.

9.5 The Committee considered correspondence from Farmers for Action requesting to meet with the Committee regarding the rate at which rural schools are closing across Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite Farmers for Action to present to a future Committee meeting, and to invite Education Authority officials to brief the Committee on area planning at the same meeting.

9.6 The Committee considered correspondence from the Chair of St Malachy's Youth Centre, Belfast, regarding a range of funding pressures.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond, highlighting that the Committee has identified youth services as a key priority and will be seeking a briefing from Education Authority Youth Service officials, and signposting the correspondent to a discussion of the matter with the DE Permanent Secretary via the "watch again" facility.

9.7 The Committee considered correspondence from the Principal of Carrickfergus Grammar School to invite members to the ResearchEd Belfast event on Saturday 28th September 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to thank the school for the invitation and to advise that it has been circulated to members.

9.9 The Committee considered correspondence from an individual highlighting the cost of the school transport system.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the individual to advise that the Committee will seek an update as to school transport policy review including the position of newcomer children who move from temporary accommodation, and ask initial questions of the Department in an upcoming oral briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to also write to the Minister seeking an update on school transport policy and costs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to dispose of correspondence not noted above per the summary notes in the meeting pack and in tabled papers.



Northern Ireland Assembly

7. Briefing with the Northern Ireland Teaching Council

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 2:34 pm:

Jacquie White, UTU General Secretary and Chair of the NITC

Maxine Murphy Higgins, NASUWT Policy and Casework Official

Mark Langhammer, NEU Regional Secretary

Mark McTaggart, INTO Northern Secretary and Secretary of the NITC

The following witness joined the meeting at 2:42 pm:

Graham Gault, NAHT Northern Ireland National Secretary

The witnesses provided the Committee with a briefing.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister to seek a commitment that the Department would use its resources to end the teacher pay dispute as a priority; and to ask for sight of the recommendations of the Department's Workforce Review Project.

Ms Brownlee joined the meeting at 4:02 pm.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:07 pm.

The meeting restarted at 4.16 pm with the following members present: Nick Mathison, Pat Sheehan, Danny Baker, David Brooks, Cheryl Brownlee, Robbie Butler, Cara Hunter, Cathy Mason, Kate Nicholl.

8. Overview of Departmental Priorities - Department of Education Oral Briefing

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 4:16 pm:



Northern Ireland Assembly

Dr Mark Browne, Accounting Officer & Permanent Secretary, Department of Education

Mr Ronnie Armour, Deputy Secretary of Resources, Governance and Early Years, Department of Education

Mrs Linsey Farrell, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education

The witnesses provided the Committee with a briefing.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Butler left the meeting at 4:29 pm.

Ms Nicholl left the meeting at 4:39 pm.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a draft forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule an informal meeting with the SEN Reform NI group.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a mini-inquiry into relationships and sexuality education.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a briefing from the Minister at its meeting on week commencing 18 March.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule briefings from both the Education Authority and the Youth Work Alliance at the same meeting after the Assembly Easter recess.

11. Any Other Business

No other business was discussed.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

12. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 28 February 2024 in Room 29 Parliament Buildings at 2:00 pm.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:38 pm.

Nick Mathison MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Education
28 February 2024