



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

Minutes of Proceedings

17 April 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 Trevor Allen (Senior Assistant Clerk)

Mr Jim Nulty (Clerical Supervisor)

Mr Joshua Devlin (Clerical Officer)



Northern Ireland Assembly

The meeting commenced at 2:00 pm in public session.

1. Apologies

No apologies were received.

2. Chairperson's Business

2.1 The Chairperson thanked the Deputy Chairperson for chairing an informal meeting that members had held NIC-ICTU Education Trade Union Group.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to discuss issues raised regarding youth service funding in future briefings on youth work

3. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

4. Minutes of Proceedings

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 10 April 2024.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

5. UNISON Free School Meals Campaign- Oral Briefing

The Committee noted a briefing paper from the UNISON.

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 2: 04 pm:

Ms Caoímhe McNeill, Official, UNISON

Ms Anne Taggart, Official, UNISON

Mr John Patrick Clayton, Policy Officer, UNISON

The witnesses provided the Committee with a briefing on UNISON's Free School Meals Campaign.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Ms Cara Hunter made a declaration of interest that she had previously worked for Kellogg's who have been involved in providing grants for breakfast clubs.

6. Department of Education Policy Update – Free School Meals, Uniform and Transport - Oral Briefing

The Committee noted a briefing paper from the Department of Education.

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 3: 01 pm:

Ms Margaret Rose McNaughton, Director of Transport and Food in Schools, Department of Education

Mr Jonathan Boyd, Head of Food in Schools Team, Department of Education

Ms Johanna McLean, Head of Transport & Food Poverty Team, Department of Education

The witnesses provided the Committee with a briefing on Free School Meals, Uniform and Transport policy.

This was followed by a question and answer session.



Northern Ireland Assembly

Mr Brooks left the meeting at 3:26pm

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department:

- Conveying disappointment that these issues have not been much further progressed by now;
- urging that the Minister write to schools not only highlighting affordability in the guidance on uniform policy but undertaking to monitor how effectively this is being adhered to;
- Seeking clear and definite timescales for consultations on uniform affordability and free school meal and uniform grant review;
- Seeking a detailed overview on the introduction of auto enrolment for free school meals;
- Asking for detailed costed options referred to by witnesses in regards to free school meals;
- Asking if the Department's approach reflect that these islands are outliers in respect of school meal provision; and
- Seeking a report on the Department's work on standardisation in regard to childcare and provision of meals in school settings.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Executive Office asking how it is engaging and what governance assessment it would make in respect of newcomer provision.

The Committee adjourned at 3:57pm.

The Committee resumed at 4:06pm

7. Education Authority – First Day Brief part 2 – Oral briefing

The Committee noted a briefing paper from the Education Authority

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 4:06 pm:

Ms Donna Allen, Interim Director of Operations & Estates, Education Authority



Northern Ireland Assembly

Mr Paul Crooks, Assistant Director of Facilities Management, Education Authority

Ms Tracy Kennedy, Assistant Director of Transport, Education Authority

The witnesses provided the Committee with an overview of the work of the Education Authority regarding Free School Meals, School Uniform and Transport.

Mrs Mason left the meeting at 4:59pm

Ms Nicholl left the meeting at 5:05pm

This was followed by a question and answer session.

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

- Seeking information on the procurement process for taxis, the per pupil cost for a SEN pupil to be transported and the increase in annual spending on this;
- Asking for detailed proposals for a sustainable model of school transport for children with special educational needs;
- Seeking a detailed plan on communication with parents on school transport;
- Seeking statistics and context for suitable schools appeals;
- Seeking sight of the draft addendum to the school transport policy referring to newcomer children;
- Seeking information on the significant increase in cost for transport hire for schools and the reasons for changes being made in the middle of the school year providing problems planning for costs; and
- Seeking details of procurement for in-school maintenance.

8. Correspondence

8.1 The Committee noted an index and summary note of correspondence.

8.2 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education regarding the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2022-23.

8.3 The Committee noted correspondence from individual regarding clean indoor air in schools.



Northern Ireland Assembly

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority regarding the issues raised in the correspondence.

8.4 The Committee noted correspondence from an individual regarding the availability of Irish-medium practice papers on the Schools' Entrance Assessment Group (SEAG) website or on request.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking investigation of inconsistencies in provision and to SEAG seeking an explanation.

8.5 The Committee noted correspondence from St Marys Primary, Fivemiletown re School Sustainability.

8.6 The Committee noted correspondence from the Clerk of the Committee for Finance regarding a Public Accounts Committee report on Excess Votes and Late Accounts.

8.7 The Committee noted an invitation from SEN Reform NI to their event, 'SEN in Northern Ireland: Lived Experiences Influencing Change in Education' which will take place on Monday 17th June 2024.

8.8 The Committee noted the seventh Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

8.9 The Committee noted the eighth Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

8.10 The Committee noted correspondence from the Education Authority notifying the Committee of a JCF Meeting.

8.11 The Committee noted correspondence from Children's Law Centre regarding its response to the Department of Education consultation on guidance on the use of restrictive practices for reference at the meeting of 15 May.

8.12 The Committee noted a response from The Department of Education to issues raised in a briefing with Comhairle na Gaelscolaíocta (CnaG).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to CnaG seeking its views on the Department's response.

8.13 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education to its request that the Executive Working Group on Mental Wellbeing, Resilience and Suicide Prevention, should be reconvened. The Minister has written to Executive colleagues to invite them to reconvene the group and intends to attend and participate himself.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to the Mental Health Champion who raised this issue with it.



Northern Ireland
Assembly

9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a draft forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the Forward Work Programme.

10. Any Other Business

Danny Baker MLA advised that Youth Forum event he attended on behalf of the Committee was excellent and very enjoyable.

11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 24 April 2024 in Room 29, Parliament Buildings at 2:00 pm.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:21 pm.

Nick Mathison MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Education
24 April 2024