



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

Minutes of Proceedings

6 March 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 Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)

Mr Jim Nulty (Clerical Supervisor)

Mr Joshua Devlin (Clerical Officer)



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

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

Mr Sheehan joined the meeting at 2:01 pm.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Committee noted a record of an informal meeting with the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists that took place on Tuesday 27 February 2024.

The Committee noted a record of an informal meeting with SEN Reform NI that took place on Tuesday 6 March 2024.

The Committee noted an itinerary for the House of Commons Northern Ireland Affairs Committee visit to Hazelwood Primary on Monday, 11 March 2024, as part of its inquiry into integrated education. Members were asked to contact the Committee Clerk if they intended to join the visit.

3. Draft Minutes of Proceedings

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 28 February 2024.

4. Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People – Oral Briefing

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 2:05 pm:



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Mr Chris Quinn, Children's Commissioner, NICCY

Dr Mairead McCafferty, Chief Executive, NICCY

Dr Arlene Robertson, Policy and Research Officer, NICCY

The witnesses briefed the Committee on the work of the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education highlighting issues raised during the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to take a thematic approach to ongoing engagement with the Children's Commissioner when considering its Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a briefing paper from the Assembly Research and Information Service on the Children's Services Co Operation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek engagement with the Department of Health in cooperation with the Committee for Health on issues in common such as guidance on restraint and seclusion and CAMHS.

5. Children's Law Centre – Oral Briefing

The Committee noted briefing papers from the Children's Law Centre.

The following witness joined the meeting at 3:07 pm:

Ms Rachel Hogan, Special Education Needs Representative, Children's Law Centre

The witness provided the Committee with a briefing on access to education for children with special educational needs.

This was followed by a question and answer session.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed to write, via the Children's Law Centre, to a child referred to in the briefing, commending their determination and offering a visit to Parliament Buildings.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request from the Education Authority school attendance data and an assessment of mental-health, support needs and other barriers to school attendance; and to consider an informal meeting with children unable to attend school due to school-based anxiety.

Ms Hunter left the meeting at 4:01 pm.

Mr Brooks made a declaration of interest that his wife is a school governor.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write the Minister of Education seeking an update on restraint and seclusion, expressing the Committee's concern for alignment of guidance for education settings with that issued by the Department of Health.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to St Genevieve's High School, commending it on good practice in welcoming and preparing to receive pupils with support needs.

Ms Hunter rejoined the meeting at 4:11 pm.

The Committee adjourned at 4:12 pm.

The Committee resumed at 4:22 pm.

6. Education Policy and Children's Services – Department of Education Oral Briefing

The Committee noted briefing papers from the Department of Education including an update on the SEND and Addressing Bullying in Schools legislation.

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 4:22 pm:

Mrs Linsey Farrell, Deputy Secretary, Department of Education

Mrs Janis Scallon, Director of Inclusion, Department of Education



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Ms Karen McCullough, Director of Qualifications, 14-19 Strategy and Youthwork Policy, Department of Education

The witnesses provided the Committee with a briefing on children's services.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Ms Nicholl left the meeting at 5:01pm

Agreed: The Committee agreed to put some follow-up questions in writing to the Department on the detail of proposed plans for SEND framework delivery and pupil support services. In particular, the Committee agreed to interrogate the matter of local integrated teams and how they came to differ from the original proposed interdisciplinary teams, as this issue was not bottomed out to Members' satisfaction.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward for reply to the Department the notes of the informal meetings held by the Committee with the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapists, and with SEN Reform NI.

Ms Hunter left the meeting at 5:27pm.

7. The Period Products (Department of Education Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee noted a briefing paper from the Department of Education on the Period Products (Department of Education Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024.

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 5:29 pm:

Mr Dale Heaney, Head of Tackling Educational Advantage Team

Ms Ashleigh Mitford, Tackling Educational Advantage Team

The witnesses provided the Committee with a briefing on the Period Products (Department of Education Specified Public Service Bodies) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer a decision and to invite Department of Education officials to brief the Committee at a future meeting.



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8. Correspondence

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

8.3 The Committee considered a letter from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy indicating a willingness to undertake joint scrutiny work on a review of Careers Guidance.

Agreed: The Committee welcomed the correspondence and agreed to write suggesting a joint meeting of the Education and Economy Committees: for this purpose; and to review the 14-to-19 framework; before summer recess.

8.4 The Committee considered correspondence from STEAM NI on the importance of involving industry in the development of STEM within the primary sector and to present to the committee on this area of education. The correspondence also included an invitation for members to visit one of the schools involved in the project.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that members would respond to STEAM NI individually in respect of a visit.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite Steam NI to present to the Committee when in due course it holds a joint meeting with the Committee for the Economy.

8.5 The Committee considered correspondence from Sentinus highlighting that its funding has been withdrawn by the Department of Education and that it is at risk of ceasing operation next year.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek more information on the funding cuts made in the absence of a devolved Minister including the cuts referred to by Sentinus, and to share that correspondence with the Committee for the Economy.

8.8 The Committee considered correspondence from an individual who ran a campaign to save a local school from closure and asked to brief the Committee on areas for further consideration in relation to sustainable schools policy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to acknowledge the correspondence and to invite a further written submission on the matter for the Committee's consideration.



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8.10 and 8.12 The Committee considered correspondence from individuals highlighting their personal experiences of the impact of childcare costs and who wish to be apprised of actions being taken to provide support to parents.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to acknowledge the letters, confirm that childcare is a priority for the Committee and refer the correspondents to relevant briefings in the recording of the meeting of 28th February 2024.

8.11 The Committee considered correspondence from the NI Youth Forum to invite the Chairperson to attend the North-South Youth Peace Event on 23 March.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that as the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson were unavailable, Danny Baker would represent the Committee at the event.

8.13 The Committee considered correspondence from Bangor Central Integrated Primary School noting its concern in relation to Fresh Start funding.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to inform the school that the Committee has written on the issue to the Minister, the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and the Secretary of State, and to advise it of any responses received.

8.14 The Committee considered correspondence from Altram, an Irish-medium early years setting in Belfast, asking for members to visit.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that individual members should contact the Committee Clerk re availability for a visit.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to examine the issue of visits to schools that are representative of various educational sectors as part of its strategic planning.

8.15 The Committee considered correspondence from the NSPCC regarding working with the Committee on some of its key priorities, including poverty and relationships and sexuality education (RSE).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to notify the NSPCC of its intended mini-inquiry into RSE.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to inform the NSPCC that it has received correspondence from other charitable bodies in the children's sector and that it would be invited to participate in a future round-table session.



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8.19 The Committee considered correspondence from young people impacted by long COVID.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek the young people's consent to share their correspondence with the Minister and the Education Authority and request an update on actions being taken, specifically with regard to clean air in schools.

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

9. Forward Work Programme

The Chairperson invited the Clerk to the Committee to update members on the forward work programme, including acceptances of invitations and logistical matters, including simultaneous interpretation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that members engage with the Clerk on availability for a strategic planning session.

10. Any Other Business

There was no other business.



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11. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 13 March 2024 in Room 29 Parliament Buildings at 2:00 pm.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:42 pm.

Nick Mathison MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Education
13 March 2024