



Committee for Education  
End of Session Report  
3 February 2024 – 31 August 2025

Report: NIA 113/22-27



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

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# List of abbreviations and acronyms used in the report

Ralse	Assembly Research and Information Services (RaISe)
DE	Department of Education
RSE	Relationship and Sexuality Education

## Remit, Powers and Membership of the Committee

The Committee for Education is a Statutory Departmental Committee established in accordance with Paragraphs 8 and 9 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement and under Assembly Standing Order No 48. The Committee has a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role with respect to the Department of Education and has a role in the initiation of legislation.

### The Committee has the power to:

- consider and advise on Departmental budgets and Annual Plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- approve relevant secondary legislation and take the Committee Stage of relevant primary legislation;
- call for persons and papers;
- initiate inquiries and make reports; and
- consider and advise on matters brought to the Committee by the Minister of Education.

The Committee has nine members, including a chairperson and deputy chairperson, with a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee during the current mandate has been as follows:

- Mr Nick Mathison MLA (Chairperson)
- Mr Pat Sheehan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
- Mr Danny Baker MLA
- Mr Colin Crawford MLA<sup>1</sup>
- Mr David Brooks MLA<sup>2 3</sup>
- Mrs Michelle Guy MLA<sup>4</sup>
- Ms Cara Hunter MLA
- Mr Peter Martin MLA<sup>5</sup>
- Ms Cathy Mason MLA

## **Review of 2024 – 2025 Session**

### **Primary Legislation**

#### **School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill**

At its meeting on 28 February 2025, the Committee received oral evidence from Departmental officials to examine the outcome of its consultation on a School Uniform Policy. The Executive had already agreed to the draft School Uniforms Bill and to its introduction to the Assembly. The Bill was introduced to the Northern Ireland Assembly on 18 February 2025 and was referred to the Committee for Education for consideration after Second Stage, which took place on 3 March 2025.

The purpose of the Bill, which contains sixteen clauses, is to make provision for binding guidelines on school uniform policies to be issued by the Department of Education and to extend eligibility for school clothing allowances payable by the Education Authority.

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<sup>1</sup> Mr Colin Crawford replaced Mr Robbie Butler 7 October 2024

<sup>2</sup> Ms Cheryl Brownlee replaced Mr David Brooks 9 June 2025

<sup>3</sup> Mr David Brooks replaced Ms Cheryl Brownlee 1 July 2025

<sup>4</sup> Mrs Michelle Guy replaced Ms Kate Nicholl 9 September 2024

<sup>5</sup> Mr Peter Martin replaced Ms Cheryl Brownlee 16 September 2024

The Committee Stage of the Bill commenced on 4 March 2025 with the publication of a signposting notice and call for evidence issued on 18 March 2025. The Committee agreed a timeline for its Committee Stage with an end date of 3 December 2025. At the debate on Committee Stage, some Committee members put down an amendment to change the end date to 30 August, and this was passed. The Committee held oral evidence sessions and explored issues with Department of Education officials both in writing and in several oral briefings. A list of stakeholders was drawn up and several stakeholder events and dates for formal evidence taking were held to gather evidence.

The Committee undertook its formal clause-by-clause consideration on 1 July 2025 and agreed its decisions on the clauses and the text of proposed amendments as outlined in the formal clause-by-clause section of the report.

The Committee formally agreed its report at its meeting on the Wednesday 2 July and agreed that the report would be published on Thursday 3 July 2025.

# Subordinate Legislation

Following the resumption of business in February 2024, the Committee has considered a total of three statutory rules laid by the Department for Education and the Committee agreed that it had no objection to the rules.

*Table 1 - Statutory Rules Considered by Year*

Session	2023 - 2024	2024 - 2025
Negative Resolution	-	2
Affirmative Resolution	-	-
Draft Affirmative	-	1
Confirmatory	-	-
Not laid	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>

# Legislative Consent Motions

During the period covered within this report, no Legislative Consent Motions have been laid by the Minister of Education.

## Inquiries

During the period covered within this report, the Committee decided to initiate a mini-inquiry into Relationship and Sexuality Education.

This was in the context of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019, the recommendations of the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 which all mandate factual, evidence-based RSE.

On 1 May 2024, the Committee agreed that the objectives of its mini-inquiry would be to compare the approaches to and outcomes of Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) in these islands and Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) internationally; to assess provision in NI; and to consider whether there was a need for reform and make conclusions, recommendations or note themes accordingly. The Terms of Reference for the mini-inquiry were agreed at the Committee meeting on Wednesday 22 May 2024.

The Committee agreed to receive a wide range of views and in particular to carry out significant youth engagement on the matter. Subsequently, several events were held to accommodate a youth audience.

The Committee agreed an indicative timeline for a written call for views, a series of oral evidence sessions and stakeholder events, and deliberation and finalisation of conclusions and recommendations.

In respect of comparative approaches, the Committee requested an inventory of relevant experts and academics from Assembly Research and Information Services (RaISe).

The Committee considered its existing stakeholder list, and an additional target stakeholder list for marginalised groups; and Members advised the clerking team of additional stakeholders for inclusion.

Throughout the latter part of 2024 and early 2025 the Committee took evidence from a wide variety of sources. The mini-inquiry expanded as many academics, stakeholders, parents and interest bodies took to the platform to express their views.

With the introduction of the School Uniforms Bill further work on the inquiry was temporarily deferred and has now resumed with publication anticipated imminently.

## **EU Scrutiny**

The Committee did not undertake any EU-related scrutiny during the session.

## **Budget Scrutiny**

The Committee received its first budget briefing at its meeting on 7 May 2025, from Departmental officials, with regard to the 2024-2025 Resource Budget.

Officials highlighted that the Department of Education's interim opening baseline for 2024-2025 was £2,577.4m. This equated to a reduction of £301.4m (10.5%) compared to the 2023-2024 closing budget of £2,878.8m. In the final 2024-2025 opening resource budget, Education received an additional £297.6m of Resource DEL for general allocation. Despite this additional funding, the Department faced a funding shortfall of over c£525m.

The Committee recognises that, as a Department with a high need for capital funding, DE requires significant resource to maintain existing infrastructure and to deliver new projects; and that it is adept at bidding for money to address its overcommitments.

The Committee has asked for more granular information, particularly in relation to spending association with the SEN transformation agenda.

The Committee expects that officials should attend for both Resource and Capital.

The Committee has received timely briefing on monitoring rounds and has scheduled budget and October monitoring round briefing alongside a capital briefing focusing on the Strule shared education project.



# **Policy Scrutiny**

## **Strategic priorities**

The Committee followed a thorough induction programme in its first months to appreciate all those matters falling within the Department's responsibility and to allow it to identify a number of strategic priorities for the remainder of the mandate. Not only did it engage with education stakeholders in this induction process but it received several briefings with the authors of the Independent Review of Education to inform its subsequent programme of work.

The Committee has selected as its strategic priorities: underachievement and deprivation; Special Educational Needs; Early years and Childcare; and a theme of Outdoor Education.

## **Underachievement and Deprivation**

The Committee carried out stakeholder engagement events with equality bodies, school and health community representatives, anti-poverty and charitable organisations, and diverse young people's NGOs. The Committee used what it learned to commission research from Assembly Research and Information Services (RaISe). The Committee subsequently heard undertook best practice comparator briefings from the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI). The Committee has engaged in scrutiny of RAISE and other programmes to tackle links between underachievement and socio-economic deprivation and will continue to do so.

## **Special Educational Needs**

The Committee has taken a particular interest in the special educational needs of a growing proportion of the school population. It has heard from equality and rights bodies, education stakeholders and engaged in concurrent work with the Committee for Health at the Middletown Centre for Autism in an effort to find ways to streamline the work of DE and DOH in compliance with the Children's Services

Co-Operation Act 2015. The Committee was particularly concerned about restraint and seclusion in schools and sought alignment of guidance to ensure that these measures cannot be used in schools for discipline, and a repeal of legal cover to this end.

The Committee agreed before summer recess to undertake a strategic review into SE transformation in the autumn term, and this is now under way.

## **Childcare and Early Years**

The Committee has sought briefing and input on the development of a childcare strategy and an holistic approach to making this realistic for working parents with young children. The Committee has met and heard from departmental officials developing this policy area and conveyed the needs of stakeholders in respect of funding, regulation, training, and gaps in provision on heard in formal and informal meetings. The Committee anticipates returning to this topic after its SEN review.

## **Outdoor Education**

The Committee's theme of outdoor education has entailed partnering with NI Forest School Association NI (NIFSA) to create more educational opportunities in the outdoors for every pupil in our school system. In particular, the Scottish Curriculum for Excellence and its outdoor teaching resources were highlighted. The Committee invited stakeholder evidence, hosted an inter-jurisdictional stakeholder engagement event and commissioned a RalSe research paper to form the basis of a motion to the House on the matter. DE, EA, CCEA, NIFSA; public servants, outdoor organisations and schools from NI, Wales, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland gathered for a colourful day of stories in the Long Gallery surrounded by huge paintings of trees and forest creatures, and captured in round table narratives and digital recording. The digital record of the day (a set of breathtaking visual minutes) has been made a penguin stand that the Committee can display, and brings a breath of fresh forest air into every meeting. The RalSe paper will be considered at the Committee's next meeting alongside a draft motion for plenary debate.

# Engagement

The Committee has sought to maximise its available time to concentrate on meeting with stakeholders externally, where practicable.

Through this work, the Committee has conducted three external meetings to receive oral evidence from departmental officials and key stakeholders to examine the relevant aspects within the Committee's remit.

The first external meeting was to the Forest School, Clondeboy Estate, Bangor.

The Committee also held an external meeting at Middletown Centre for Autism.

More recently, the Committee held an external meeting in Bangor Academy.

The Committee has also met informally on 40 occasions to receive briefings from and engage with organisations and individuals who preferred an informal approach or could not be accommodated during the Committee's formal weekly meetings.

## Committee Motions

During the period of this report, the Committee agreed two motions.

The first was a joint motion with the Committee for the Economy, calling on the Department of Education and the Department for the Economy to act with urgency with regard to: the publication and implementation of a careers action plan; the publication and implementation of a wider action plan for the 14-19 strategy; a timeline for delivery of the careers portal; the publication and implementation of a plan to improve post-school and post-19 SEND provision which includes legislative proposals that have been developed on a cross-departmental basis alongside colleagues in the Department of Health. Before this could be debated in plenary, the publication and implementation of a careers action plan was announced; the Committees will receive briefing on this in due course before considering their motion once again.

The second motion was a motion on Restrictive Practices highlighting the painful, ongoing debate and campaign for minimisation if not eradication of restrictive

practices in schools and other education settings. This was scheduled for plenary and debated on 30 June 2025.

## Likely key priorities for the next session

The Committee will undertake a strategic review of SEN reform to date and the new SEN transformation agenda.

It will continue to work on its other strategic priorities and theme and hopes to carry out a study visit to make good practice comparison.

It anticipates that legislation will be introduced by the Department namely the proposed Schools Inspections Bill; a bill on GTC NI; and a bill mandating full-time education for 16-18 year olds.

At least two Private Members’ Bills (PMBs) are also in development in relation to education, namely the Holiday Hunger PMB proposal by Danny Baker MLA and the Irish Medium Education Workforce Planning proposal by Pat Sheehan MLA.

The Committee has also agreed to begin preparatory work on a Committee bill which would seek to amend the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Act which had its Final Stage on 13 October 2025.

## External meetings

As part of its ongoing programme of work, the Committee undertook the following external meetings:

Location	Date
Forest School, Clandeboye Estate, Bangor	1 May 2024
Middletown Centre for Autism, Armagh	19 February 2025
Bangor Academy Grammar School, Bangor	26 March 2025

## Outputs to date

### Appendix 1 – Session facts and figures

#### Committee meetings & visits

Session	Number of meetings held	Percentage minutes public/closed	Number of meetings held outside Parliament Buildings	Number of committee visits
2023/2024	31	Public – 93% Closed – 7%	1	1
2024/2025	31	Public – 94% Closed – 6%	2	2

#### Statutory Rules

Session	Negative Resolution	Affirmative Resolution	Draft Affirmative	Confirmatory	Not laid	Total
2024/2025	2	0	1	0	-	3

#### Witnesses

Session	Organisations which gave evidence to the committee
2023/2024	37
2024/2025	62

## Appendix 2 – Committee expenditure

*Table 2 – Expenditure for the period 3 February 2024 – 31 August 2025*

Budget area	Details	Expenditure
Committee Travel	Committee members, staff travel and subsistence relating to visits and meetings outside Parliament Buildings	£53.00
Advertising	Includes the cost of advertising relating to:	£855.84
External Consultancy	Includes costs associated with committee use of external consultants to assist in consideration of legislation, inquiries, etc.	£2742.60
Refreshments and Hospitality	See below	£0.00
General expenditure	Cost of refreshments for committee meetings, committee events, working lunches, seminars, room hire, witness expenses, and conference fees for members etc.	£4968.76
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>£8620.20</b>

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Aoibhinn Treanor  
Clerk to the Committee  
Committee for Education  
Northern Ireland Assembly  
Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast BT4 3XX

Telephone: 028 90 521628

Email: [committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:committee.education@niassembly.gov.uk)

X (formerly Twitter): @NIACfEd