



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 20 MAY 2020

Room 29 / Teleconference, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)

Present by Teleconference:

Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Mr William Humphrey MLA
Ms Catherine Kelly MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Justin McNulty MLA
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)

In Attendance by Teleconference:

Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Ian McAdam (Clerical Supervisor)
Mr Ed McCann (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 9:30am in open session.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

2.1 On-line Safety

The Chairperson reminded members that the Department had launched the Safer Schools app in April 2020 which was designed to assist schools in

combating on-line safety issues. The Committee noted that the app had now been made available to children.

The Chairperson also reminded Members that the Executive's coronavirus plan identifies a key role for blended learning which is understood to include on-line provision. The Chairperson noted that Stranmillis University College is currently providing a course on this matter for teachers. The Chairperson also referred to previous relevant publications by Noel Purdy from Stranmillis University College on important on-line safety considerations for children.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite Noel Purdy and relevant staff from Stranmillis University College to provide it with an oral briefing on blended learning provision including on-line safety considerations for pupils.

2.2 Post-Primary Transfer

The Chairperson referred Members to correspondence forwarded by Thomas Buchanan MLA setting out a constituent's concerns relating to the proposed delays to the staging of the unregulated post-primary transfer tests in 2020.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to put concerns in respect of the staging of the unregulated post-primary transfer tests to the teaching unions at the subsequent briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to all post-primary schools, which make use of academic selection in order to determine enrolment, inviting them to:

- set out their concerns in respect of the impact of the lockdown on preparation for and staging of the unregulated post-primary transfer tests and the proposed related delays;
- identify their preferred alternative options in respect of post-primary transfer and enrolment given the impact of the lockdown; and
- provide information on the contingency plans which they are developing in this regard.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Clerk should provide the Committee with proposals for an on-line survey of those groups likely to be affected by delays to the staging of unregulated post-primary transfer tests.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission Assembly Research to produce a short paper summarising the features of the different English and Maths progress tracking products which are understood to be in very wide use in schools in Northern Ireland.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meetings held on 13 May 2020.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Coronavirus and the impact on schools – Northern Ireland Teachers’ Council (NITC) - Oral Briefing

The Committee noted papers on options for re-opening schools and supporting learning during the summer term from the National Education Union.

Witnesses joined the meeting by teleconference at 9:39am.

Mr Justin McCamphill, National Official Northern Ireland, National Association of Schoolmasters Union of Women Teachers;

Mr Mark McTaggart, Assistant Northern Secretary, Irish National Teachers' Organisation;

Ms Geri Cameron, President, National Association of Head Teachers;

Ms Jacquie White, General Secretary, Ulster Teachers' Union; and

Mr Mark Langhammer, Regional Secretary, National Education Union.

The witnesses briefed the Committee on the recent resolution of the teachers' pay and conditions dispute and on the impact of coronavirus on schools.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Bradley left the meeting at 10:00am.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for their attendance.

6. Department of Education - Coronavirus Response – Ministerial Oral Briefing

The Committee noted the Department's 15 May 2020 Situation Report on the coronavirus response and correspondence from substitute teachers on covid-19 and hardship issues.

The Minister and an official joined the meeting by teleconference at 11:08am.

Mr Peter Weir MLA, Minister for Education; and

Mr Derek Baker, Permanent Secretary, Department of Education.

The Minister and his official briefed the Committee on the Department's response to the coronavirus.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Humphrey left the meeting at 11:30am.

The Chairperson thanked the Minister and the official for their attendance.

7. Coronavirus Contingency Programme – Department of Education and Education Authority - Oral Briefing

The Committee noted a Department of Education briefing paper on the Curriculum, Qualifications, and Standards Directorate (CQSD) Contingency Programme.

Officials joined the meeting by teleconference at 12:11pm.

Mrs Faustina Graham, Director of Curriculum, Qualifications and Standards, Department of Education;

Mrs Karen McCullough, Head of School Improvement Team, Department of Education;

Mr Raymond Caldwell, Assistant Chief Inspector, Education and Training Inspectorate; and

Ms Michele Corkey, Director of Education, Education Authority.

Officials briefed the Committee on the Department's CQSD Contingency Programme.

The Chairperson thanked officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to defer questioning of officials until its next meeting on Wednesday 27 May 2020. The Committee further agreed to write to the Department asking that officials comment (upon their return) on the differing pupil experiences of distance learning owing to socio-economic deprivation and the extent to which the Education and Training Inspectorate is to support blended learning pedagogies in order to facilitate the relevant aspects of the Executive's coronavirus plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to NITC seeking a paper setting out its views on the likely resource and cost pressures that will need to be met and the achievable timescale for the education aspects of the Executive's coronavirus plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity as to whether as part of lockdown relaxation considerations it was to consider permitting Special School classroom assistants to provide support in the home in order to help pupils with the transition back to school.

Mr Newton left the meeting at 12:23pm

8. Correspondence

8.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

8.2 The Committee considered correspondence from the Northern Ireland Forest School Association (NIFSA).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange a visit with NIFSA in the autumn.

8.3 The Committee considered correspondence from the Youth Work Alliance about concerns regarding the delay in the implementation of the Education Authority's new funding arrangements for youth organisations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking clarity on the reported delay to new funding arrangements for youth organisations.

8.4 The Committee considered correspondence from the Committee for Finance providing guidance on in-year monitoring rounds. The Committee also noted a briefing paper from Assembly Research on in-year monitoring.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking a written or oral summary of its June Monitoring Round bids.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Chairperson to reflect its views at the Supply Resolution Further Vote on Account debate on 26 May 2020.

8.5 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Justice inviting views on the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill.

8.6 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from the Committee for Communities to the Minister for Education forwarding a briefing paper from Solace NI on the impact of covid-19 on local councils.

8.7 The Committee noted correspondence from Parentkind seeking to brief the Committee on its recent online survey.

9. Forward Work Programme

Agreed: The Committee agreed a revised forward work programme including a briefing from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment on the examination appeals consultation. The Committee further agreed to receive briefings from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People and the Education Authority on Special Educational Needs statementing subject to the availability of the new Starleaf video-conferencing facility.

The Committee noted that all scheduled Education Committee meetings until summer recess now had allocated briefings. Some Members strongly indicated their preference for a general limit of 2 oral briefings per Education Committee meeting going forward.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule an additional meeting on 8 July 2020, during summer recess, in order to receive a briefing from the National Children's Board on its report on emotional health and mental well-being.

The Committee moved into closed session at 12:28pm

The Committee noted that Assembly Secretariat staffing resources were very unlikely to be able to support an extensive programme of Education Committee meetings during summer recess.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to give further consideration to the requirement to hold further additional Education Committee meetings during summer recess.

10. Any Other Business

Agreed: Further to the above, the Committee agreed to write to all post-primary schools, which make use of academic selection in order to determine enrolment, inviting them to provide oral evidence on their current post-primary transfer concerns.

11. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 27 May 2020 in Room 29, Parliament Buildings and by teleconference at 9:00am.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:39pm.

**Mr Chris Lyttle MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
27 May 2020**