



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 10 March 2021

Video Conference

Present by Video Conference:

Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Ms Nicola Brogan MLA
Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Mr William Humphrey MBE MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Justin McNulty MLA
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Ms Aoibhinn Treanor (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Craig Mealey (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Emma Magee (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 9:36 am in public session.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

2.1 Briefing from the Minister for Education

The Chairperson reminded members that the Minister had been due to brief the Committee at this meeting but had to postpone the briefing due to Executive business. The Committee discussed a suitable date to receive a briefing from the Minister.

Mr Bradley joined the meeting at 9:38am.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it would seek alternative times from the Minister subject to plenary business.

2.2 Committee Stakeholder event

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content to proceed with a proposed Committee stakeholder event to be held on Zoom on 24 March at 6pm to engage with children and young people about their emotional wellbeing and mental health.

2.3 Informal meeting with NITC on GTCNI

The Chairperson informed the Committee that Members held an informal meeting with NITC regarding their concerns about the GTCNI and that a note on the meeting will be distributed to Members.

2.4 Exam Assessments

The Chairperson informed members that concerns have been raised about the recent announcement about centre determined assessments for GCSEs, A Levels and other qualifications.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange an informal meeting on Tuesday 16 March 2021 at 9:00am via Starleaf to hear from NITC and ASCL on this matter.

2.5 Ministerial announcements

The Chairperson expressed concerns that recent announcements made by the Minister had been made by written Assembly Statements which don't allow Members to ask questions.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 3 March 2021.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Children and Young People's Voices - Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the mental and physical health of children and young people

The Committee noted briefing papers from Secondary Students' Union of NI (SSUNI) and Crisis Café.

The following witnesses joined the meeting by video conference at 9:55am:

Mr Cormac Savage, President, Secondary Students' Union for Northern Ireland

Mr Morgan Shuttleworth, Mental Health Officer, Secondary Students' Union for Northern Ireland

Ms Sophia Armstrong, Community Relations Officer, Secondary Students' Union for Northern Ireland

Ms Inez Murray, Representative, Crisis Cafe

Mr Odhran McAllister, Representative, Crisis Cafe

Mr Matthew Taylor, Director / Co-Founder, Pure Mental

Mr Theo Burton, Policy Officer, Pure Mental

Mr Jay Buntin, Director / Co-Founder, Pure Mental

Ms Lauren McAreavey, Representative, Northern Ireland Youth Forum

Mr Jack Dalzell, Representative, Northern Ireland Youth Forum

Ms Bronagh Close, Representative, NICCY Youth Panel

Ms Taisie Court, Representative, NICCY Youth Panel.

The witnesses briefed the Committee on the impact of the covid-19 pandemic on their emotional well-being and mental health and the work they had done in their representative organisations to address these matters for themselves and others.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for the briefing.

Mr McCrossan left the meeting at 11:30am.

Mr McNulty left the meeting at 12:46pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed write to the witnesses thanking them for briefing the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education:

- Forwarding Hansard of the evidence session;
- Endorsing perspectives from the panelists promoting widespread provision and availability of period products so it is not an impediment to participation and also endorsing the option to wear trousers for all pupils at school to give them equal comfort and decorum particularly during their period;
- Urging it to take on board young people's perspectives about restart; anxiety about safety; and dismay at exams plans; and
- asking it to increase access to counselling services in schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking:

- Information on an "assessment blitz" for returning pupils;
- clarity on the investment and strategy for implementing the mental health and wellbeing framework;
- Enhanced engagement with groups representing children and young people and asking how it would improve this communication;

and echoing the need for period products and flexibility around dress for pupils' comfort and decorum.

Agreed: The Committee agreed copy correspondence to the Executive Office.

6. Correspondence

6.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

6.2 The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Education on vaccination of Special School Staff and noted with concern that the Minister had again not provided a timescale for the vaccination programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write again to the Minister of Education and the Minister of Health seeking information on which special school staff would be vaccinated and when this would be done.

6.3 The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Education offering a comparison of the Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework, Children and Young Peoples Strategy and Executive Recovery programme.

6.4 The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Health on vaccination of staff in special schools.

6.5 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education outlining available qualifications equivalent to those offered by WJEC.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write again to the Department of Education regarding its concern that while alternative qualifications were available these did not have the specific content of the WJEC courses.

6.6 The Committee noted a response from Department of Education providing an explanation for delays implementing the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act (Northern Ireland) 2016 and indicating its intention to implement the Act from 1 September 2021.

6.7 The Committee noted a response from the Chairperson of the Education Authority regarding conversion therapy. The response does not comment on the social media post by a Member of the Board but has stated its commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write again asking how the Board had dealt with this matter and seeking assurances that the code of conduct had not been breached.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to the Committee for Health.

6.8 The Committee noted a response from CCEA to the Committee's follow-up letter to CCEA evidence session on the Deloitte Report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite CCEA to brief it informally on the five-step plan.

6.9 The Committee noted correspondence from CCEA regarding new exam arrangements for GCSE, AS and A Level grades.

6.10 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for the Executive Office providing a copy of a letter to the Minister for Education about embedding Mental Health in the Curriculum.

Mr Humphrey left the meeting at 1:11pm.

6.11 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for the Economy providing Hansard of its briefing on the 14-19 strategy.

6.12 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance providing a copy of a letter forwarded from the Minister for the Economy in relation to Covid-19 business support schemes supported by Department of Finance.

6.13 The Committee noted correspondence from the Public Accounts Committee about issues regarding the Board of Governors approvals at a School.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking an update on the matters raised in the correspondence.

6.14 The Committee noted correspondence from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children & Young People providing a copy of submissions to the Department of Education on the Draft Special Educational Needs Regulations and the Draft Code of Practice.

6.15 The Committee noted correspondence from the British Heart Foundation NI seeking a meeting with the Committee Chairperson and Deputy regarding an upcoming Private Member's Bill on mandatory CPR training in post-primary schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the British Heart Foundation NI to brief it informally along with Colin McGrath MLA, the Member proposing the Private Member's Bill.

6.16 The Committee noted correspondence from Action for Children providing a link to a video referred to in its briefing to the Committee on 17 February 2021.

6.17 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from Parent Action to Executive Office on the needs of Special Educational Needs pupils.

6.18 The Committee noted correspondence from the Office for Statistics Regulation about its review into the approach for developing statistical models for awarding grades in 2020.

6.19 The Committee noted correspondence from Omagh Learning Community regarding funding for the Engage programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education for its response to the matters raised in the letter.

6.20 The Committee noted correspondence from RSPB providing a copy of a letter to the Finance Minister regarding the establishment of a Green Recovery Fund.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education for information on the actions it proposes to include for schools under such a fund.

6.21 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence to the Exchequer about exam invigilators.

6.22 The Committee noted correspondence regarding payments to exam invigilators.

6.23 The Committee noted correspondence regarding concerns about the post primary transfer test.

6.24 The Committee noted correspondence regarding concerns on how a return to school will affect Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) individuals and their families.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education asking what measures are in place to support CEV individuals and their families, and seeking its response to the campaign asks included with the correspondence.

6.25 The Committee noted the Department of Education Investment Activity Report for February 2021.

6.26 The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Education on the Review of Home to School Transport.

6.27 The Committee noted correspondence from the Minister of Education - Covid-19 Childcare Sustainability Support Fund

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request an in-year budget briefing from DE officials to address plans for a comprehensive childcare strategy and other funding priorities.

6.28 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education to questions on Emotional Health and Wellbeing which arose after the Action for Children Blues Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to Action for Children.

6.29 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education about its Strategy for children looked after.

6.30 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education on the Tackling Paramilitary Activity, Criminality and Organised Crime Programme.

6.31 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education providing an Official Report Extract from an evidence session with the Minister of Education on 10 February 2021 on repeating the school year.

6.32 The Committee noted correspondence regarding concerns about CCEA's plans for awarding GCSE, AS and A2 qualifications.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education about the issues raised in the correspondence.

6.33 The Committee noted correspondence about planning and strategies being put in place for school restart.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education about the issues raised in the correspondence.

6.34 The Committee noted correspondence proposing a public communication announcement strategy aimed at young people that will help prepare them to return to face-to-face learning.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking its views on the proposals.

6.35 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence to the Minister about the use of Irish as a first language in the Education system beyond GCSE.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking a response on this matter.

6.36 The Committee noted correspondence regarding proposals to close St Mary's Primary School, Brollagh.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking information on the proposed closure.

6.37 The Committee noted correspondence about the removal of C2K Virtual Learning Tools during the pandemic.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education about this matter.

7. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed its forward work programme as amended.

The Committee moved to closed session at 1:25pm.

8. Any Other Business

No other business was discussed.

9. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next formal Committee meeting will be held on the afternoon Tuesday 23 March 2021 by video conference at a time to be agreed subject to plenary business in the Assembly.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:35pm

**Mr Chris Lyttle MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
24 March 2021**