



Northern Ireland
Assembly

COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 2 DECEMBER 2020

Video Conference and the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)
Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Nicola Brogan MLA
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA

Present by Video Conference:
Mr Robbie Butler MLA
Mr William Humphrey MLA
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA
Mr Justin McNulty MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Mr Peter McCallion (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)
Ms Paula Best (Clerical Supervisor)
Ms Emma Magee (Clerical Officer)

The meeting commenced at 9:35am in open session.

1. Apologies

There were no apologies.

2. Chairperson's Business

2.1 New Member of the Committee

The Chairperson welcomed Nicola Brogan MLA to the Committee for Education.

2.2 Integrated Education

The Chairperson reminded Members that at the briefing of 25 November 2020, a number of questions arose in respect of the definition of Integrated schools; the nature of mixing in schools and the Certificate in Religious Education (CRE).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the Integrated Education Fund and the Ulster University UNESCO Centre to brief on Integration/mixing in schools and the CRE respectively, in the New Year.

2.3 Suspension / Expulsion (Exclusion)

The Chairperson reminded Members of the findings of the 2004 report into suspension and expulsion (exclusion) in schools. The Chairperson noted that the report found that some schools did not have an expulsion (exclusion) scheme or viewed pre-expulsion consultations as a formality and that there was inconsistency in the application of suspension and expulsion (exclusion) arrangements in different sectors and reported use of delaying tactics by schools as a way of avoiding offering a place to an expelled (excluded) pupil.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking clarification on the action had been taken in order to address the issues set out in the 2004 report into suspension and expulsion (exclusion).

2.4 Procurement in Schools

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Finance Minister had made a statement on Tuesday 1 December 2020 regarding procurement during which Members had made reference to poor procurement practices in education.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking clarity on the level of delegation that schools currently enjoy in respect of maintenance work and its plans to improve procurement arrangements for schools.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 25 November 2020.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Special Educational Needs Framework - Consultation on Regulations and the Code of Practice: Departmental oral evidence session

The Committee noted a Departmental briefing paper and a Commencement Order relating to Section 1 of the Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.

The following witnesses joined the meeting by video conference at 9:39am:

Mr Ricky Irwin, Director, Inclusion and Wellbeing, Department of Education;

Ms Sharon Lawlor, Head of Special Education and Inclusion Review Team, Department of Education; and

Ms Jan Matthews, Special Education and Inclusion Review Team, Department of Education.

The evidence session was reported by Hansard.

The officials gave oral evidence to the Committee on the consultation on aspects of the revised Special Educational Needs Framework.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Newton joined the meeting at 10:19am.

The Chairperson thanked the witnesses for the briefing.

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

- sight of the training/awareness programme and professional development plans to support the new Framework in schools;
- information on the terms of reference and timescales for the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) review of Special Educational Needs provision;
- an update on the Department's revised processes for transition planning for Special Educational Needs children moving from education into employment and training;
- an update on the qualifications and destinations of children and young people with Special Educational Needs;
- contact details for the Special Educational Needs Co-ordinators cluster groups;
- information on the number of late statements, those subject to valid exceptions and those delayed owing to the late provision of information from Health and Social Care Trusts;
- information on the Department's funding for educational psychologists' training;
- clarity on the timescale for commencement and the introduction of regulations associated with the SEND Act (NI) 2016;
- further information including the terms of reference for the inter-departmental co-operation group; and
- update on the Special Educational Needs learner journey transformation project.

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

- information on the timescales between the provision of statements and the delivery of related supports; and
- an update on the Education Authority's review of the educational psychology service.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write and offer congratulations to St Cecilia's College for winning Secondary School of the Year for 2020 in the National Teaching competition and offering commiserations to Hazelwood Integrated College.

6. Looked After Children and Care Experienced Children and Young People's Strategy - Department of Education, Education Authority and Department of Health – oral briefing

The following officials joined the meeting by video conference at 11:22am:

Mr Ricky Irwin, Director, Inclusion and Wellbeing, Department of Education;

Mrs Angela Kane, Head of Pupil Support Team, Department of Education; and

Ms Anne-Marie Bagnall MBE, Looked After Children Champion for Northern Ireland, Education Authority.

The following official joined the meeting by video conference at 11:28am:

Ms Eilís McDaniel, Director of Childcare and Family Policy, Department of Health

The officials briefed the Committee on the Looked After Children and Care Experienced Children and Young People's Strategy.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Ms Mullan made a declaration of interest that a family member was in kinship care.

Mr Butler made a declaration of interest that he was a part-time foster parent.

Mr Humphrey left the meeting at 12:50pm.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education (and to copy the correspondence to the Committee for Health):

- welcoming the Strategy and the intended improvement to joined-up-ness between departments in respect of Looked After Children;
- welcoming the role of the Looked After Children champion and the results of the Key Stage 2 Looked After Children pilot programme;
- encouraging the Department to engage with Initial Teacher Education (ITE) providers in order to enhance the Looked After Children content of their curricula;
- encouraging the Department to develop the report card targets for the Strategy;
- calling on the Department to provide more Looked After Children champions,
- seeking sight of the independent evaluation of the Key Stage 2 pilot programme;
- seeking clarity as to whether alternative education provision will be provided for Looked After Children above compulsory school age;
- seeking clarity as to whether the 14-19 Strategy will make specific provision for Looked After Children;
- seeking confirmation as to whether Personal Education Plans are to be made statutory;
- seeking sight of the Looked After Children Strategy implementation plan and the related children's rights impact assessment; and
- seeking information on the provision of additional resources for Looked After Children during the pandemic and clarification as to how Looked After Children are to be supported to engage with the curriculum and assessment in 2020-21.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to St Mary's University College; Stranmillis University College; Ulster University and Queen's University Belfast asking those organisations to set out how ITE currently supports new teachers in supporting Looked After Children and to identify their plans to enhance relevant ITE curricula.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education indicating that it felt that the use of acronyms e.g. LAC and SENCO might be viewed as pejorative and that their use should be discontinued.

7. Correspondence

7.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

7.2 The Committee considered correspondence suggesting that parents rather than church representatives should be included on schools' Boards of Governors.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarity on the rules around membership of school Boards of Governors and the numbers of church representatives and the current uptake of parent governorships.

7.3 The Committee noted a response from the Education Authority indicating the impact of lockdown on educational psychologist referrals.

7.4 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education regarding C2K and the NI Substitute Teachers Register (NISTR).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to the Northern Ireland Teachers' Council who had raised the relevant issues.

7.5 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education regarding the draft Children and Young People's Strategy providing a further invitation for the Committee to comment on the draft Strategy prior to submission to the Executive.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write again to the Department asking for explanation as to the origin of the obligation for departments to have general regard to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

7.6 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education on contingency arrangements for examinations and curriculum delivery.

7.7 The Committee noted correspondence from Holy Trinity College seeking a virtual meeting involving pupils to discuss examination concerns.

Agreed: The Committee agreed return to this correspondence at its next meeting and following the anticipated oral briefing from the Minister on examinations and curriculum delivery and related covid-19 issues.

8. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to combine oral briefings from the Youth Work Alliance, Uniform Hub and Network Youth NI on covid-19 and restart issues on 13 January 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to schedule a briefing from Autism NI on Autism Spectrum Disorder mandatory teacher training.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a further oral and written briefing on the feedback to the Department of Health-led consultation on the covid-19 support plan for vulnerable children.

Mr Newton left the meeting at 1:09pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed its Forward Work Programme as amended.

9. Any Other Business

The Committee discussed its planned stakeholder event on vulnerable children and Special Educational Needs support.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to extend the invitation to the stakeholder event to the Special Schools Strategic Leadership group and a representative of Belfast Special Schools.

Members recorded considerable concerns relating to rumoured early Christmas school closures and ongoing confusion in respect of examinations and assessment in 2021.

10. Date, Time and Place of next meeting

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 9 December 2020 in Room 30, Parliament Buildings and by video conference at 9:30am.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:12pm.

**Mr Chris Lyttle MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Education
9 December 2020**