



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## COMMITTEE FOR EDUCATION

### Minutes of Proceedings

WEDNESDAY 14 OCTOBER 2020

Room 29 and Video Conference, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

**Present:** Mr Chris Lyttle MLA (Chairperson)  
Mr Robbie Butler MLA  
Mr Daniel McCrossan MLA  
Mr Justin McNulty MLA  
Mr Robin Newton MBE MLA

**Present by Video Conference:**  
Ms Karen Mullan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA  
Ms Catherine Kelly MLA

**Apologies:** Mr William Humphrey MLA

**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 12:07pm in public session.*

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to adopt a revised order for agenda items and to defer the scheduled oral briefings with the Education Authority Board on Special Educational Needs governance and the Department of Education on the revised Children and Young People's Strategy.

#### 1. Apologies

Apologies were as indicated above.

#### 2. Chairperson's Business

##### 2.1 Closure of schools

The Chairperson advised Members that a recent Executive statement indicated that schools would close for a longer than expected period over Halloween. The

Committee recorded its disappointment that its previous suggestions in respect of advising schools in good time of closures had been apparently disregarded. The Committee also noted concerns in respect of the provision of support to vulnerable children with Special Educational Needs and the absence of related guidance for principals and parents. The Committee also recorded concerns relating to the pressure on schools to provide tracing services for pupils who may have been exposed to the virus.

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

- seeking clarity in respect of how it is working with the Education Authority and Public Health Agency in order to chart the spread of the virus in schools;
- further to previous correspondence, seeking school-based data showing the number of covid-related incidents in schools where pupils or teachers have tested positive or been obliged to self-isolate;
- seeking clarity as to how the data reportedly quoted by the First Minister showing limited covid-19 incidents matches up to reports from school principals which appear to show many more covid-19 related incidents;
- asking for the extent to which mobile testing units have been used to support schools and the criteria under which mobile testing units will be deployed;
- seeking clarity as to whether schools are to receive any additional support in order to undertake tracing of pupils who may have been exposed to the virus; and
- urging the Department to develop contingency plans in order to support schools to provide blended learning in the event of longer school closure periods.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education in respect of the period of closure over Halloween seeking clarification:

- as to whether free school meals, payments or other alternatives will be provided by schools;
- as to how “at risk” children will be supported;
- as to how Special Educational Needs and health service support which is normally provided in school is to be provided to vulnerable children; and
- regarding the provision of childcare and in particular childcare provided in a school setting.

## 2.2 Informal meeting with the Equality Commission and the Equality Coalition

The Chairperson advised the Committee that Members had met informally with the Equality Commission and Equality Coalition on Tuesday 13 October 2020 to discuss issues relating to the provision of educational support services during the pandemic.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to invite the Children’s Law Centre to provide it with an oral briefing on issues relating to vulnerable children’s educational support during lockdown and restart.

## 2.3 October Monitoring and 2021-24 Budget Information

The Chairperson referred the Committee to an October Monitoring Round submission and budget information provided by the Department of Education for 2021-24.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to arrange an oral briefing from the Department of Education on October Monitoring and the 2021-24 budget information.

#### 2.4 Supply Resolution and Budget (No.3) Bill

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed that the Chairperson would speak on behalf of the Committee during the Supply Resolution debate on 19 October 2020.

### 3. Draft Minutes

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 7 October 2020.

### 4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

### 5. Correspondence

5.1 The Committee noted an index of incoming correspondence.

5.2 The Committee noted a response from the Department confirming that substitute teachers who are required to self-isolate will continue to be paid during the period of their engagement with schools.

5.3 The Committee considered a response from the Minister on the Independent Review of Education.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking clarity on whether the terms of reference and the appointment arrangements will be subject to co-design or if they will be undertaken by the Department alone. The Committee also agreed to ask to be consulted on the terms of reference for the Independent Review of Education.

5.4 The Committee considered a response from the National Education Union (NEU) providing its views on flexibility around school starting age.

5.5 The Committee noted correspondence from St Mary's Pomeroy about the funding allocation for the extension on Nurture programmes in schools.

5.6 The Committee considered correspondence from Minister setting out his plans for the 2021 examination series.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education asking the extent to which the suggestions from the Council for the Curriculum, Examinations and Assessment (CCEA) and consultee suggestions were included in the final version of examination and assessment plans and seeking further clarity in respect of the limited mitigations for GCSE English and maths.

5.7 The Committee noted a response from CCEA regarding examination contingencies for 2020-21.

5.8 The Committee noted a response from CCEA on evidence provided to the Committee on 3 June 2020 about the grade awarding models for GCSE, AS and A-Level.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Minister indicating its dissatisfaction with the response received from CCEA.

5.9 The Committee noted correspondence from a concerned parent about the examination and curriculum revision processes for 2021.

5.10 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education providing updates on the October Monitoring Round and the Budget 2021-2024 information gathering exercise.

5.11 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance to the Department of Finance seeking details of monitoring round bids and outcomes.

5.12 The Committee considered a response from the Education Authority on SEN statements relating to hearing loss and the teaching for the deaf workforce.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to forward the Education Authority's response to the Department of Education seeking its views on the funding of training for teachers for the deaf.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to commission Assembly Research to provide information on the numbers children with hearing impairment at primary and post-primary and progressing to third level education.

5.13 The Committee considered correspondence from Dyslexia Awareness NI outlining concerns about access to the curriculum and support for dyslexic children in Northern Ireland.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to forward Dyslexia Awareness NI's letter to the Department of Education indicating its concerns about reported reductions in support for dyslexic children and seeking the Department's views on the matters raised.

5.14 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence from PATOSS - the professional association of teachers of students with specific learning difficulties - to the Minister of Education seeking additional funding or flexibility for schools to allow them to avail of PATOSS' support.

5.15 The Committee considered correspondence from a concerned parent in relation to the seclusion of pupils and restart guidance.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking confirmation of the requirement to record seclusion and data on the number of times that symptomatic children have been secluded at school.

5.16 The Committee noted a response from the Clerk to the Assembly / Assembly Chief Executive on the availability of alternative Committee meeting rooms.

## **6. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to seek an oral update briefing from the Minister on restart and the closure of schools during Halloween.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to seek to reschedule the postponed briefing with Education Authority Board on Special Educational Needs governance and with the Department of Education on the revised Children and Young People's Strategy.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to re-schedule other briefings as appropriate.

## **7. Any Other Business**

The Committee recorded its appreciation to Assembly Communications for its successful promotion of the post-primary transfer survey.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to continue proceedings in closed session from 12:55pm.

The Committee considered bringing a motion to plenary for debate in relation to its on-line survey into post-primary transfer.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed to submit the following motion for debate in plenary:

*“That this Assembly takes note of the feedback to the Committee for Education’s on-line survey into post-primary transfer testing and calls on the Minister for Education to outline contingency plans for post-primary transfer arrangements.”*

The Committee considered a draft press release on the report on its post-primary transfer survey.

*Agreed:* The Committee agreed the press release, as amended, for publication on 19 October 2020.

## **8. Date, Time and Place of next meeting**

The next Committee meeting will be held on Wednesday 21 October 2020 in Room 29, Parliament Buildings and by video conference at 9:30am.

*The meeting was adjourned at 1:13pm.*

**Mr Chris Lyttle MLA**  
**Chairperson, Committee for Education**  
**21 October 2020**