



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

Minutes of Proceedings

26 February 2025

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Mr Nick Mathison MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Danny Baker MLA
Mr David Brooks MLA
Mrs Michelle Guy MLA
Mr Peter Martin MLA
Mrs Cathy Mason MLA

Ms Aoibhinn Treanor (Assembly Clerk)
Mr Mark McQuade (Assistant Clerk)
Mr Jim Nulty (Clerical Supervisor)
Mr Thomas McConville (Clerical Officer)

Present via Teleconference:

Mr Colin Crawford MLA
Ms Cara Hunter MLA



The meeting commenced at 2:00pm in public session.

1. Apologies

No apologies were received.

2. Chairperson's Business

2.1 Informal briefing with Young Enterprise

The Committee noted a record of an informal briefing with Young Enterprise on Tuesday 18 February 2025 along with briefing papers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Education and the Minister of the Economy seeking information on engagement with Young Enterprise and the scope for supporting its work, including financial support.

2.2 Informal meeting with Middletown Centre for Autism

The Committee noted a record of an informal briefing with Middletown Centre for Autism and presentation slides.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Middletown Centre for Autism thanking it for hosting the Committee visit.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education asking about the involvement of the Middletown Centre for Autism in the SEN delivery plan; funding for the work of the centre; and management of the site.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Communities regarding the upkeep of listed buildings on the Middletown site.

2.3 Access NI checks

The Committee discussed concerns regarding Access NI checks on non-teaching staff.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking a written briefing on delays to Access NI checks for non-teaching staff in schools.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Justice seeking a written briefing on delays to Access NI checks for non-teaching staff in schools.

3. Declaration of Interests

Mr Mathison made a declaration of interest that he is a member of the Board of Governors for Killinchy Primary School.

Mrs Mason made a declaration of interest that she is a member of the Board of Governors for St. Macartan's Primary School, Loughinisland.

Mr Brooks made a declaration of interest that his wife is a member of the Board of Governors of Grosvenor Grammar School and Mitchell House School.

Mr Crawford made a declaration of interest that he is a member of the Board of Governors for Harryville Primary School.

4. Matters Arising

The Committee noted a press release from the Department of Education regarding investment in outdoor equipment for schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking clarity on the practicalities of roll-out, particularly:

- The timescale for spending funding awarded through the scheme; and
- whether the work can be carried out by approved suppliers in the timescales.

The Committee noted that the Minister of Education had placed minutes of his meeting with Lisneal College and the Minister of the Economy in the Assembly Library.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Education asking:

- What communication the Minister had with the Education Authority after that meeting in relation to the pitch replacement at Lisneal College; and



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- To explain any seeming inconsistencies between the minute and the account provided in evidence to the Committee.

5. Minutes of Proceedings

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 12 February 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the minutes of the concurrent meeting of the Committee for Education and the Committee for Health on 19 February 2025.

Ms Hunter joined the meeting at 2:23pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education and Department of Health expressing concerns that the current patchwork provision of services was not fit for purpose and seeking:

- Detailed, measurable information on the SEN delivery plan;
- Information on the number of Allied Health Professionals working in schools;
- Information on the proposed 'encompass' database;
- Information on the joint education and health workforce plan; and
- Information on the number of Irish Language specialist Allied Health Professionals available.

6. Report on Classroom Assistants - Oral Briefing from Ulster University and the Centre for Effective Services

The Committee noted a copy of the 'Classroom Assistants in Northern Ireland Report' and an infographic.

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 2:24pm:

Professor Una O'Connor Bones, Senior Lecturer, University of Ulster

Dr Caroline Courtney, Research Associate, University of Ulster

Ms Majella McCloskey, Director, Centre for Effective Services

The witnesses provided the Committee with a briefing.



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This was followed by a question and answer session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to Department of Education seeking its assessment of the recommendations made in the report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking a briefing in response to the report to explore how the role of classroom assistant could be developed and recognised within the SEN delivery agenda.

7. Educational Underachievement – Oral Briefing from Expert Panel on Underachievement

The Committee noted the report 'A Fair Start - Final Report and Action'; the Hansard report of the oral briefing by the expert panel 6 October 2021; an Assembly Research paper on Educational underachievement; a copy of the Panel's opening statement ; pen profiles of the panel; and Fair Start Progress Report 6 (as at 30 June 2024).

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 3:20pm:

Professor Noel Purdy, Director of Research and Scholarship, Stranmillis University College, Expert Panel on Underachievement

Dr Jackie Redpath, Expert Panel on Underachievement,

Ms Mary Montgomery, Expert Panel on Underachievement,

Ms Joyce Logue, Principal Longtower Primary School, Expert Panel on Underachievement

Ms Kathleen O'Hare, Retired Principal, Hazelwood Integrated College and former Principal of St Cecillia's College, Expert Panel on Underachievement

The witnesses provided the Committee with a briefing.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister of Education asking for a report as to how use of the CSCA Act is being prioritised across departments in respect of pooling of funding to action the recommendations of the 'A Fair Start' report.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to The Executive Office and the Department of Finance noting that the expert panel was set up under New Decade New Approach, that its funding and recommendations received Executive commitment and all 47 should accordingly be contained within the final iteration of the current Programme for Government.

The meeting adjourned at 4:30pm

The meeting resumed at 4:37pm

8. Minor Works Transactions Process – Briefing by the Education Authority

The Committee noted that a briefing paper from the Education Authority and a response from the Minister of Education had been received on a number of issues, including spending on minor works and school enhancement projects.

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 4:37pm:

Mr Richard Pengelly, Chief Executive, Education Authority

Ms Donna Allen, Interim Director of Operations & Estates, Education Authority

Mr Roger Sayers, Assistant Director, Infrastructure and Capital Development, Education Authority

The witnesses provided the Committee with a briefing.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mrs Mason left the meeting at 5:12pm.

Mr Crawford left the meeting at 5:13pm.

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

- Sight of the terms of reference of the proposed Education Authority review so as to have a chance to inform these;
- The terms of the agreement for the use of the pitches at Lisneal College by outside organisations;
- Information on the division of minor works funding in relation to SEN projects; and



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- A written briefing on how minor works are prioritised as category rationales invited revamp.

9. Correspondence

9.1 The Committee noted a correspondence Index.

9.2 The Committee noted an invitation from the Committee for the Economy to Education and Economy Ministers to appear together before a joint concurrent meeting of the Committee for the Economy and the Committee for Education on Wednesday 14 May 2025.

9.3 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education regarding Bangor Schools' Integrated status.

9.4 The Committee noted a response from the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) regarding Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) at the college.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the response to the report on the Committee inquiry on RSE.

9.5 The Committee noted correspondence from Marie Curie providing views on the Minister for Education's response on bereavement policy and support for schools.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward this to the Department of Education.

9.6 The Committee noted a response from Southern Regional College regarding Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE) at the College.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the response to the report on the Committee inquiry on RSE.

9.7 The Committee noted correspondence from Women's Aid Federation NI providing an evaluation of the Helping Hands and Social Guardian Training Report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the response to the report on the Committee inquiry on RSE.

9.8 The Committee noted correspondence from Outscape providing a guide on the future of outdoor recreation in seven Irish counties.



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9.9 The Committee noted a response from the from Department of Education providing an update on the data collected by the Department in relation to the Addressing Bullying in Schools Act.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an oral briefing from the Department of Education on best practice in addressing bullying in schools.

9.10 The Committee noted correspondence from the Chair of management side on the offer for teachers' pay in 2024/25.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to management side seeking an update on what engagement is taking place with trade union side.

9.11 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance regarding concerns about NICS sickness absence levels.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education asking what action they plan to take to respond to sick absence levels amongst its staff.

9.12 The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance regarding information from the Open Government Network NI on the status of open government in Northern Ireland.

9.13 The Committee noted the thirty-second Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

9.14 The Committee noted correspondence from MessyPlay NI regarding additional Investment for Transforming Outdoor Play in NI Schools.

9.15 The Committee noted correspondence regarding Lisneal College.

9.16 The Committee noted a written briefing paper on air quality in schools.

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

9.17 The Committee noted the School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill.

9.18 The Committee noted an invitation from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to Annual Human Rights Lecture 2025.

9.19 The Committee noted correspondence from the Department of Education providing an update on engagement with stakeholders on transforming youth work.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the response with Youth Work Alliance.



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Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking the timescales, scope and information on its engagement strategy with youth work bodies.

9.20 The Committee noted a response from the Education Authority providing information on operational matters.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Education Authority seeking clarity on the support for children in non-statutory settings.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking its funding plans for Early Years local impact teams.

9.21 The Committee noted an invitation from the Centre for Public Policy and Administration at Queen's University Belfast to a Seminar on the Potential for Artificial Intelligence in the Public Sector.

9.22 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education indicating that it intends to involve Women's Aid Federation in the ongoing engagement to inform the development of the Early Learning and Childcare Strategy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the response with Women's Aid Federation.

9:23 The Committee noted correspondence regarding Lisneal College.

9.24 The Committee noted an invitation to an event to mark Welcome to Your Vote Week 2025.

Ms Hunter left the meeting at 5:53pm.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a draft forward work programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed its Forward Work Programme.

11. Any Other Business

No other business was discussed.



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12. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting

The next Committee for Education meeting will be held on Wednesday 5 March 2025 at 2:00pm.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:57pm.

Pat Sheehan MLA

**Deputy Chairperson, Committee for Education
5 March 2024**