



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## Committee for Education

### Minutes of Proceedings

07 January 2026

**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 Cathy Mason MLA  
Mr Gary Middleton MLA

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

Present via teleconference facilities:

Mr Jon Burrows MLA  
Mrs Michelle Guy MLA  
Ms Cara Hunter MLA

**Apologies:**

None



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

### **1. Apologies**

No apologies were received.

### **2. Chairperson's Business**

The Committee noted a record of the informal meeting with representatives from EBSNA and ABSNA on Tuesday 9 December 2025 on school attendance.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to discuss the issues raised with officials from the Department of Education and Education Authority in planned oral briefings on attendance.

### **3. Declaration of Interest**

Ms Hunter made a declaration of interest for the session with Smartphone Free Childhood as Ms Carson on the witness panel is her party colleague.

### **4. Matters arising**

There were no matters arising.

### **5. Draft Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of its meeting held on 10 December 2025.



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## **6. Strategic Review of Current SEN provision and Transformation Agenda - Oral Briefing by Middletown Centre for Autism**

The Committee noted a briefing paper from Middletown Centre for Autism.

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 2:03pm.

Mr Stephen Douthart, CEO, Middletown Centre for Autism

Dr Fiona McCaffrey, Head of Research & Development, Middletown Centre for Autism

Mrs Jill McCanney, Head of Learning Support and Assessment, Middletown Centre for Autism

Mr Andrew McCracken, Head of Finance and Corporate Services, Middletown Centre for Autism

The witnesses provided the Committee with a briefing on SEN services.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Sheehan left the meeting at 3:18pm

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to explore learning from other jurisdictions with officials from the Department of Education and Education Authority in correspondence and planned oral briefings on attendance.

## **7. Oral Briefing by Smartphone Free Childhood**

The Committee noted a briefing paper from Smartphone Free Childhood.

The following witnesses joined the meeting at 3:18pm.



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Ms Rosalind McClean, Smartphone Free Childhood NI Regional Co-Leader

Ms Charlotte Carson, Smartphone Free Childhood NI Parent and Teacher (Vice president NEU NI)

The witnesses provided the Committee with a briefing on the use of smartphones by children.

Mr Sheehan rejoined the meeting at 3:29pm.

This was followed by a question and answer session.

Mr Baker left the meeting at 4:13pm.

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

- What action is being taken to monitor how schools are complying with current guidance under safeguarding statutes;
- Does it have any plans for ETI to be formally mandated to inspect schools on their compliance with that guidance; and
- Whether it is planning legislation on smartphone use in schools.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Mental Health Champion seeking her views on the mental health impact of smartphone use.

The Committee moved to closed session at 4:34pm

### 8. Mini Inquiry into Relationship and Sexuality Education

The Committee discussed a draft report on its Mini Inquiry into Relationship and Sexuality Education

The Committee returned to public session at 4:53pm.

**Agreed:** Members agreed to provide feedback on the draft report through the Clerk



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**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek Legislative competence advice on the Committee Bill.

### 9. Correspondence

9.1 The Committee noted an index of correspondence.

9.2 The Committee noted a response from the Education Authority on Savings Measures.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed write to the Department of Education seeking an update on the category 2 savings it is assessing for decision.

9.3 The Committee noted a submission from the Association of Educational Psychologists to its SEN Inquiry.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to add this to the papers for the inquiry.

9.4 The Committee noted a submission from the Northern Ireland Council for Integrated Education to its SEN Inquiry.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to add this to the papers for the inquiry.

9.5 The Committee noted a submission from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People to its SEN Inquiry.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to add this to the papers for the inquiry.

9.6 The Committee noted a Memorandum of Reply from the Department of Finance regarding the PAC Committee's report 'Managing the Schools' Estate'.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to engage with PAC with a view to receiving with an oral briefing from the NIAO on the report in due course.

9.7 The Committee noted a submission from Integrated AlumNI to its SEN Inquiry.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to add this to the papers for the inquiry.



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9.8 The Committee noted correspondence from an individual regarding concerns about support for children with Special Educational Needs that do not fit in mainstream, learning support units within mainstream or special schools.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to add this to the papers for its SEN inquiry.

9.9 The Committee noted a submission to the Committee's RSE inquiry presenting an educational psychologist's work and perspective on RSE.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to add this to the papers for its RSE inquiry.

9.10 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education on SEN Regulations.

9.11 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education providing additional information following an oral briefing on Finance.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Education seeking a full breakdown of the budgets for TransformED and the Curriculum review.

9.12 The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Education in relation to Transgender guidance.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to share the Minister's response with the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, and the Children's Law Centre seeking their views.

9.13 The Committee noted a copy of correspondence to the Minister of Education regarding clean air in schools.

9.14 The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Education in relation to the Supreme Court ruling on the teaching of Religious Education (RE) in schools.

9.15 The Committee noted a response from the Minister of Health regard regulation of private tutoring.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to share the response with the correspondent that raised this issue with it.

9.16 5 The Committee noted a response from the Department of Education on the 'Education (Pupil Reporting) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025'.



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**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to return to this when the Examiner of statutory rules has reported on the statutory rule.

9.17 The Committee noted correspondence for diaries from the Evangelical Alliance in relation to its Lost Boys Follow Up report.

### **10. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered its forward work programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content with the forward work programme as drafted.

### **11. Any Other Business**

No other business was discussed.

### **12. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting**

The next Committee for Education meeting will be held on Wednesday 14 January 2026 at 2:00pm in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:02pm.

**Nick Mathison MLA**  
**Chairperson, Committee for Education**  
**14 January 2026**