



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Health

Minutes of Proceedings

28 November 2024

Meeting Location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present:

Liz Kimmins MLA (Chairperson)

Danny Donnelly MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

Diane Dodds MLA

Órlaithí Flynn MLA

Nuala McAllister MLA

Alan Robinson MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Linda Dillon MLA

Colin McGrath MLA

In Attendance:

Keith McBride, Clerk

Roisin Donnelly, Assistant Clerk

Angela McParland, Assistant Clerk

Jonathan Lamont, Clerical Supervisor

Stephen McGlennon, Clerical Officer

The meeting commenced at 2.03pm in public session.

1. Apologies

Alan Chambers MLA was an apology.

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred Members to the Assembly Private Members' Business debate on Tuesday, 26 November 2024, on 'Maternity and Children's Hospital: Delays', at which the Health Minister stated he had been informed of a further issue in relation to the Maternity Hospital. The Committee noted remarks by the Minister that he had been dismayed at not being notified earlier of the issue.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to receive an oral briefing on 5 December 2024, on the Maternity Hospital and Children's Hospital, centred around accountability and transparency. The briefing to be attended by the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Interim Chief Executive, the Chair of the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust Board, and relevant Department of Health (DoH) officials.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the officials attending the meeting on 5 December should provide a list of issues regarding the Hospital sites, detail of who within the Department and the Trust were made aware of each issue and when, and the solution to each issue.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange a visit to the Hospitals to view the new layout of the hospitals and, where appropriate, receive briefings from officials on the expert advice given to the Trust and Department.

The Chairperson referred Members to the Committee's informal session on Tuesday, 26 November 2024, with Department of Health officials on General Medical Services. The Chairperson noted that the session was the last in a series of such meetings aimed at informing Members on how Department branches carry out their work.

Agreed: The Committee will review this approach at its planning session in January 2025.

The Chairperson referred Members to the Foundations for the Future conference held on Wednesday, 27 November 2024, at the Crown Plaza Hotel. The conference addressed progress on recommendations from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services. The Chairperson noted that the programme of speakers included Professor Ray Jones who led the Review and that Nuala McAllister MLA had Chaired a Q&A panel with Members of the Children's Services Strategic Reform Board.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note that Professor Ray Jones acknowledged at the conference the emphasis the Committee has put on the Review and that the Professor highlighted the need for the Executive to take ownership of the recommendations of the Review.

The Chairperson referred Members to the Cancer Focus event on screening for lung cancer, held on Tuesday, 26 November 2024, in Parliament Buildings.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to receive information on what consideration has been given, by the Department, to introducing routine lung cancer screening that would enable early diagnosis. The Department to also provide information on whether there has been, or whether there are plans to do, scoping exercises on

costs of a routine lung cancer screening service, including gaining an understanding of potential savings that early diagnosis may bring the health service.

3. Draft Minutes

The Committee agreed the draft Minutes of the meeting on 21 November 2024.

4. Matters Arising

There were no matters arising.

5. Independent Neurology Inquiry Retention and Disposal Schedule

The Committee considered the Independent Neurology Inquiry Retention and Disposal Schedule.

Agreed: The Committee was content with the Retention and Disposal Schedule as set out.

6. Health and Social Care Workforce Policy - Oral Briefing from the Department of Health

The following officials joined the meeting at 2:19pm:

- Phil Rodgers, Director of Workforce Policy, Department of Health (DoH);
- Peter Barbour, Head of Workforce Development Unit, DoH;
- Stephen Galway, Head of Workforce Policy Development Business Support Unit, DoH;
- Rodney Redmond, Head of Workforce Strategy, DoH; and
- Chris Wilkinson, Head of Pay and Employment Unit, DoH.

The officials briefed the Committee on Workforce Policy.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

The Chairperson declared an interest as having worked as a social worker in the health service.

The Deputy Chairperson declared an interest as a Registered Nurse, South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust. Nursing Bank, band five and six.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

The briefing session was reported by Hansard.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to keep a watching brief on the number of Medical School graduates from the Ulster University Derry-Londonderry Campus (Magee Campus) who choose to practice in the North West or in Northern Ireland.

7. Reform and Transformation of Health and Social Care Services - Oral Briefing from the Department of Health

The following officials joined the meeting at 3.25pm:

- Peter Jakobsen, Director of Regional Health Services Transformation, DoH; and
- Michelle Estler, Head of Transformation Branch, DoH.

The officials briefed the Committee on Reform and Transformation of Health and Social Care Services.

The briefing was followed by a question and answer session.

The briefing session was reported by Hansard.

The Chairperson thanked the officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee noted that the Department had provided a response to the Committee on 10 September 2024 to the Committee's request regarding information collected on the reasons why individuals come

off waiting lists. The Committee will seek clarity on this at the upcoming briefing on Waiting Lists.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that transformation of services must always be evidence led and agreed to write to the Department to receive:

- information on its findings to date from any measuring or tracking exercises carried out for those elements of the Transformation project implemented or currently being implemented;
- clarity on what data is available to the Department in regards to the reasons for patients not attending appointments i.e. what data is collected by each Trust on this issue; and
- information on how the Department and the Trusts are looking at, or intend to look at, best practice in terms of addressing barriers for access to services, including collating data in order to have a proper understanding of outcomes for patients who have not been able to access services.

Colin McGrath left the meeting at 3.50pm

Nuala McAllister left the meeting at 3.57pm

Linda Dillon left the meeting at 4.01pm

8. Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031, Cancer Strategy 2022-2032, and Stroke Action Plan – Written Briefing by the Department of Health

The Committee considered a written briefing on the Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031, the Cancer Strategy 2022-2032, and the Stroke Action Plan.

The Committee discussed that, whilst it understands the budgetary pressures for the Health Service, it is extremely concerned over the major discrepancies between the funding identified as required to meet the needs of cancer patients and mental health patients and the actual funding allocated.

The Committee considered that Northern Ireland has the highest rates of mental health waiting lists in the UK and the problem is transgenerational. Waiting times can mean a patient is waiting years, health issues can become more complex the longer

the patient is on the waiting list and this creates further issues for the Health Service and Executive services as a whole.

The Committee considered that a Suicide Prevention Strategy is operational but forthcoming data from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency (NISRA) is expected to show an increase in suicides in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson write to the Minister, to include:

- the Committee is extremely concerned about the continued increase in red flag referrals, cancer diagnoses and mental health referrals and would like confirmation that these increases will be factored into the Strategies going forward and into associated funding to meet the requirements of the Strategies; and
- the Committee acknowledged the increase in suicide rates for Northern Ireland and feels there is an urgent response needed from the Minister on the issue. The Committee would request further information on the actions being taken by the Department to address this increase.

9. Implementation of the Community Pharmacy Strategic Plan 2030 – Written Briefing by the Department of Health

The Committee considered a written briefing on the implementation of the Community Pharmacy Strategic Plan 2030.

The Committee discussed the recent announcement on the Pharmacy First initiative for sore throats to be offered in most community pharmacies and that community pharmacies are integral to the Department's winter preparedness planning.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to receive, as the Strategy is subject to additional funding and a new IT system, information on the level of funding that is required.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to receive information on whether the Department plans to provide the Pharmacy

First on sore throats initiative as an all-year round service and also to receive information on what support the Department is giving to those community pharmacies that provide extra services for winter pressures.

10. Correspondence

- i. The Committee noted a response from the Department to its request for further information following a briefing on the Inquiries Implementation Programme on 24 October 2024.
- ii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Communities in regards to that Committee writing to the Department of Health on home improvement support agencies.
- iii. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance in regards to that Committee's work on the timeliness of departmental responses to the Department of Finance's Summer 2024 Budget Information Gathering Exercise to inform the 25-26 Budget.
- iv. The Committee noted correspondence from the Committee for Finance regarding that Committee's Inquiry into the Northern Ireland Banking and Financial Services Landscape.
- v. The Committee noted a copy of the submission from the Older People's Parliament to the Consultation on the draft Programme for Government 2024-2027.
- vi. The Committee noted an Investment Strategy Northern Ireland 'Investing Activity' Report for November 2024.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered a draft Forward Work Programme.

The Chairperson reminded Members of the forthcoming informal meeting with the Patient and Client Council work group on SAI to be held on Tuesday, 3 December 2024, in Room 21.

The Chairperson reminded Members of the Committee's visit, on 5 December 2024, to the Northern Ireland Hospice and the Children's Hospice, the first in a series of visits the Committee will undertake for evidence gathering for its Inquiry into Access to Palliative Care.

The Chairperson referred Members to the Effective Questioning session scheduled for Thursday 6 February 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note that a further informal session to allow the Committee to hear from a representative group of persons affected by Serious Adverse Incidents is being scheduled into the Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the draft Forward Work Programme.

12. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

13. Date, Time and Place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee was scheduled to take place at 2.30pm on 5 December 2024.

The meeting was adjourned at 4.31pm.

Liz Kimmins MLA

Chairperson, Committee for Health

5 December 2024