2022-2027 Mandate - Committees

The Committee for Education

Northern Ireland Assembly
Education Service

Strategic Objectives

Following the return to operation of the Assembly in February 2024, the Committee held a series of induction briefings to hear from key education stakeholders. Following this, it agreed its strategic objectives for the mandate, to focus on: early years and childcare; special educational needs (SEN); deprivation and underachievement; and outdoor education.

The Committee has carried out stakeholder engagement, research and good practice comparisons with other jurisdictions in these areas. (See SEN Inquiry and Policy Scrutiny below.)

Legislation - Executive Bills

The Committee considered and reported on the **School Uniforms (Guidelines and Allowances) Bill**, introduced by the Education Minister, Paul Givan MLA, in February 2025. The Bill aimed to reduce the cost of school uniform and extend eligibility for school uniform allowances.

The Minister wrote to the Committee in March 2025, asking for the Committee Stage to be finished in time for the Bill to complete all stages of the legislative process by the Assembly's summer recess (early July), so that the Minister could issue guidelines to schools by November 2025. The Committee had already agreed to request an extension of the Bill's Committee Stage to 3 December. It replied to the Minister outlining the necessary components of a properly conducted Committee Stage and did not agree to the Minister's request. However, it did say that it would carry out its functions with urgency. In the debate on the motion to extend Committee Stage, held on 7 April 2025, an amendment to an earlier date of 30 August 2025 was passed by the Assembly. In the end, the Committee reported on the Bill before summer recess, on 3 July 2025, as it felt that the school holiday period was not an appropriate time to consult with education stakeholders.

The Committee set aside other work and held additional meetings to ensure full scrutiny of the Bill. It consulted widely and tabled 23 amendments to the Bill including 'rights of the child' elements, such as the right of girls to wear trousers to school, and the requirement that schools adapt policies to allow reasonable adjustment for special educational needs and disabilities, and cultural and religious differences. It is the job of the Speaker to select amendments for debate at Consideration Stage and the Speaker did not select 11 of the Committee's amendments including the right for girls to wear trousers and a specific cap on the number of branded uniform items required. The Speaker's decisions regarding selection of amendments are final and cannot be challenged. This is the first time that a Speaker hasn't selected Committee amendments. (Individual MLAs may also table amendments to legislation.)

The Final Stage debate on the Bill can be read here: Official Reports (13 October 2025). The Bill was passed and is now the **School Uniform (Affordability and Guidelines) Act**. In the final debate, the Chair and other members of the Education Committee expressed disappointment with the Bill.

The Act places a statutory (legal) duty on the Department to issue guidelines on uniform affordability, requiring schools to:

- ensure parents can buy items from multiple retailers, including supermarkets;
- run uniform banks or exchanges;
- avoid disciplining pupils for uniform breaches due to financial hardship; and
- use free school meal eligibility (household income under a certain amount) as a benchmark for affordability.

The **Education Inspections Bill** – seeks to require participation by teachers in school inspections, as recent 'working to rule' strike actions (pay and workload disputes) resulted in a lack of school inspections – is still at Committee Stage. The **General Teaching Council Bill** (to reform this arms-length body of the Department of Education) completed its Committee Stage in May 2026 but has still to be scheduled for Consideration Stage. Before the end of the mandate, the Committee also expects a bill from the Minister to **extend full-time education to the age of 18**.

Legislation – a Committee Bill

The School Uniforms (Trousers) Bill - The Committee consulted widely with stakeholders and young people and identified strong support for allowing girls the right to wear trousers as part of their school uniform. The Committee had attempted to amend the School Uniform (Affordability and Allowances) Bill to include this right and, when it was unable to, it decided to introduce its own Committee Bill. The School Uniform (Trousers) Bill passed the 2nd stage (debate on general principles) on 30 June 2026. An Ad-hoc committee was created to take the Committee Stage of the Bill and this was completed on 6 October 2026. The Bill is currently awaiting scheduling for Consideration Stage. During the Committee Stage, the Minister announced that he would revise school uniform guidelines to ensure that girls had the right to wear trousers to school from the 2028 to 2028 academic year. The Committee as Bill Sponsor considered that it wished to continue the legislative process of its bill, to reflect the significance of preventing unlawful sex discrimination, the nuance of its approach and to avoid risks of not proceeding, such as guidelines being changed subsequently. Scheduling of amending stages will proceed in November 2026.

Legislation - Members' Bills

The Committee has scrutinised 2 Members' Bills, both from Committee members:

The Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill is sponsored by Danny Baker MLA and aims to provide direct payments to the parents of children and young people entitled to free school meals during school holiday periods. The Committee received 19 written responses to its call for views on the Bill and it took oral evidence from the Bill Sponsor; Assembly Research and Information Service; the Department of Education; Children in Northern Ireland; the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People; and the Youth Assembly. Following

clause by clause scrutiny, the Committee published its report on the Bill in July 2026. Consideration Stages were then completed (amending stages) and the Bill passed its Final Stage on 10 November 2026. It was not supported by the Minister and his party. They argued that it was a welfare payment which should not come out of the already stretched Department of Education budget.

The **Irish Medium Education (Workforce Plan) Bill** aims to address the shortage of teachers in Irish-medium schools and, in particular, SEN teachers. The sponsor is Pat Sheehan MLA, the Deputy Chair of the Committee. The Committee took oral evidence on the Bill from the Bill Sponsor; Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISe); the Department of Education; Coláiste Feirste; Gaelcholáiste Dhoire; CnaG; Altram; the Youth Assembly; and the Bunscoil an tSléibhe Dhuibh. The Committee reported on the Bill in July 2026. The Bill's had its Final Stage on 10 November 2026. However, a valid Petition of Concern was submitted in relation to the Final Stage vote, so the vote is delayed and will require cross-community support.

Inquiries

The Education Committee has completed 2 inquiries so far in this mandate into Relationship and Sex Education in Schools (RSE), and SEN Provision in Northern Ireland.

Mini-Inquiry into RSE in Schools: During the period when the Assembly was down at the start of the mandate (May 2022 to February 2024), the Secretary of State made the Relationships and Sexuality Education (Northern Ireland) (Amendment) Regulations 2023 which amended The Education (Curriculum Minimum Content) Order (Northern Ireland) 2007. These came into force on 1 July 2023. The regulations inserted the following recommendation from CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women) into the specification of minimum content for 'Learning for Life and Work: Personal Development: to "Make age-appropriate, comprehensive and scientifically accurate education on sexual and reproductive health and rights a compulsory component of curriculum for adolescents, covering prevention of early pregnancy and access to abortion, and monitor its implementation."

The Department of Education had consulted on parental opt-out and issued guidance to schools which included the terms under which parents might withdraw their child from elements that Personal Development curriculum (early pregnancy and access to abortion).

At its first meeting on 14 February 2024 the Committee considered secondary legislation from the Department on this issue - the Curriculum (Circumstances in which a Pupil may be Excused from Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights Education) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023, which came into force on 1 January 2024. The Committee did not object to the secondary legislation but members expressed a range of views and the Committee agreed to carry out a **mini-inquiry** into RSE.

The inquiry involved comparing the approaches to teaching RSE in the UK, Ireland and internationally; assessing current provision in Northern Ireland; and reaching conclusions on the need for reform. It also explored the recommendations for schools in the Gillen Review of Serious Sexual Offences to consider if RSE might play a role in 'consent education' to reduce sexual violence, particularly against women and girls. The Committee sought the views of parents and teachers, and children and young people through surveys and

consulted the Youth Assembly and other education, and rights and equality stakeholder groups. The Committee published its report on the Bill in July 2026.

The Committee made a number of recommendations in the report, including the following:

- RSE should be child centred in content and delivery, and age appropriate;
- it should be inclusive, reflecting diverse identities (gender and sexual identity) and cultures, and different family types;
- RSE should be standardised across schools and schools should consult parents and pupils when developing RSE policy, and keep parents informed about who is teaching RSE and what resources are being used for delivery;
- schools should record data on pupils being withdrawn from RSE and the right to withdrawal should be phased out gradually;
- content must include the issues of consent and health relationships; and
- a school's RSE policy and teaching should be inspected.

The report was debate on 2 November 2026. The motion was

> "*That this Assembly notes the report of the Committee for Education on Relationship and Sexuality Education (RSE); recognises the importance of age-appropriate, evidence-based and inclusive RSE in supporting safeguarding, well-being and respect for others; further notes concerns about the consistency and adequacy of current provision highlighted during the Committee's mini-inquiry, particularly by children and young people; further recognises the role of RSE in tackling bullying, promoting healthy relationships and recognising sexual abuse and exploitation, and helping children and young people to recognise and navigate online challenges and risks; endorses the recommendations of the Committee for Education as set out in its report; and calls on the Minister of Education to bring forward proposals to strengthen the delivery, consistency and oversight of RSE in schools, informed by ongoing and meaningful consultation and engagement with parents, teachers and children and young people*".

The House divided and the motion was passed. In the Minister's response to the debate, he said: "The report's findings raise legitimate concerns about the quality and consistency of RSE provision. I share many of those concerns. The reality is that our current curriculum is too vague. It sets out broad aspirations but too often fails to provide clear expectations". He also argued that the Department's Curriculum 28 reforms would address these issues. He was critical of the length of time the Committee spent on the inquiry: "While the Committee was examining the consequences of a weak curriculum, my Department was getting on with the job of replacing it. In the time that it took to complete this inquiry, we have reviewed the curriculum, consulted on reform and drafted a new framework."

The Minister said that he could not support the Committee's recommendation that the parental right to withdraw children from aspects of relationships and sexuality education should be phased out and he expressed concerns about the teaching of gender ideology.

Strategic Review of SEN Provision and Transformation Agenda: The main objective of the Committee's inquiry into SEN Provision was to consider the challenges faced within current SEN provision in schools and assess if the Department's *SEN Reform Agenda Delivery Plan* is addressing these. The Committee called for evidence with a closing date for written responses of 20 November 2025. The Committee planned to take a snapshot of perspectives and give feedback to the Department to assist with the development of

effective policy initiatives. The Committee reported on its review in July 2026. Key recommendations included calls to:

- address the school placement crisis;
- develop and publish an Inclusive Education Policy which clearly defines the roles of mainstream schools, specialist provision within mainstream schools and special schools;
- enhance SEN training for all school staff and increase support for SENCOs
- prioritise early intervention;
- tackle inequality in Irish-medium education;
- issue guidance on restraint and seclusion;
- create a joint Health-Education framework to increase collaboration between the departments;
- improve post-19 support; and
- improve access to educational psychologists.

Policy Scrutiny

The Committee scrutinised departmental policy in the areas identified by the Committee as strategic priorities in this mandate. Examples include:

- Inquiry into SEN provision
- Inquiry into RSE
- Research and stakeholder engagement on the issue of educational **underachievement and deprivation** (including taking evidence from educational leaders on effective school leadership in disadvantaged schools at its meeting on 18 March 2026. (One area of focus has been the impact of deprivation on boys' education.)
- engagement with stakeholders and the Department of Education on **childcare and early years'** related matters, including changes to the Tax-Free Childcare scheme. (The Committee took evidence from Departmental officials on the childcare strategy at its meeting on 13 May 2026.)
- tabling a committee motion for debate in the Chamber which proposed imposing smart targets on the Department in regard to Curriculum Mainstreaming and a Strategy for **Outdoor Learning** in Schools. The motion was debated and agreed by the Assembly in plenary on 24 November 2025.

It is difficult to demonstrate that the Minister has taken on board the views of the Committee in any of these policy areas.

Workload

The Committee has a very high workload. The Minister is working on several strands of education reform (Transform ED NI), including Curriculum Review and changes to CCEA GCSE and A-Level qualifications. The Committee engaged with history, sustainability, STEM, LLW experts to inform curriculum reform during the Department's review. The Committee will complete the Education Inspections Bill on or before 9 December and then move to focus on these reforms. It has already scheduled academic stakeholders to advise on literacy, languages, maths etc in curriculum, in early 2027.

In addition to issues already mentioned, other areas of interest for the Committee include school governance and the operation of the Children's Services Co-operation Act (2026) which places a legal duty on departments to work together in planning and delivery services for the well-being of children and young people.

Press Statement

In June 2025, following riots in Northern Ireland, in which ethnic minorities were targeted, the Assembly issued a press statement on behalf of the Education Committee, which said:

'The Education Committee today made clear its unanimous abhorrence of the racial violence in local towns in the past week and deplored its divisive and traumatic impact on young people in school. The Committee agreed wholeheartedly with the Minister's comments in plenary that every young person in Northern Ireland whatever their background must be respected, protected and supported. The Committee supports the Minister's commitment to interventions on behalf of traumatised pupils by the Education Authority's emotional health and wellbeing unit and its intercultural education service. The Committee urges increased … resourcing of these services to help support development of kind and diverse school cultures and young people who can all be confident and proud of their varied stories.'

The Committee repeated these sentiments in June 2026 when similar racial violence took place.

November 2026