

The Education Committee – 2011-16 Mandate

Bills: Education is often viewed as a contentious subject in Northern Ireland. Consequently relatively little legislation has been successfully progressed through the Assembly. The **Education Committee** undertook the Committee Stage of the Education Bill in November 2012 to April 2013. This was a simplified version of another similar Bill which had not progressed during the previous mandate, owing to political disagreement. The 2012 Bill was designed to streamline the administration of education in Northern Ireland – creating the Education and Skills Authority (ESA) which was to be the sole employer of all staff in schools and regularising management/sectoral relationships between the Department of Education and all schools. In the absence of agreement on this issue at the Committee, the Bill was not progressed by the Minister. However a much simplified Bill which amalgamated the 5 Education and Library Boards into the Education Authority – which is now the largest public sector employer in Northern Ireland - was approved by the Assembly in 2014. During the 2011-16 mandate, 3 other bills were successfully scrutinised by the Committee and progressed into law. The Special Educational Needs and Disability Act puts new obligations on the Education Authority to plan special provision for children with additional learning needs and to co-operate with Health organisations in the provision of those needs. It also provides children with new rights in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The Shared Education Act provides a definition which is designed to ensure that shared education leads to a measurable improvement in attitudes to and good relations with other communities in Northern Ireland. The addressing Bullying in Schools Act clearly defines bullying and requires schools to apply anti-bullying policies and keep good records of bullying incidents. The Committee amended all of this legislation – usually with the co-operation of the Department. Committee amendments included the new obligations on Special Educational Needs (SEN) co-operation and in respect of improved specificity of SEN statements. The Committee also effectively amended the definition of Shared Education to ensure that it delivers educational benefit and community cohesion. In order to inform its scrutiny of the Addressing Bullying in Schools legislation, the Committee undertook specially moderated focus groups – managed by the Assembly Education Service and the Assembly Research Service - with children and young people. The focus groups suggested that additional measures were required in schools in order to tackle cyberbullying. The Committee therefore proposed (and the Department and Assembly accepted) amendments which would allow schools to introduce policies to tackle cyber-bullying.

Budget: The Department of Education has the 2nd largest resource budget of all of the departments in the Northern Ireland Executive – just over £2bn per year. Over half of this money goes directly to fund the operation of schools. Ministers have attempted at various times to reform the school funding system – e.g. diverting funding in order to meet educational need and/or to support a limited rationalisation programme which would reduce the number of small, less sustainable, schools. In the 2011-16 mandate, the **Education Committee** spent a lot of time considering the Department’s proposed changes

to the school funding system. The Committee took a great deal of evidence from a wide range of schools and suggested considerable changes to the Department's plans. The Department accepted some of the Committee's proposals including the provision of transitional funding for schools. The Committee called for the consideration of an alternative funding scheme in which support for educational intervention would be linked to educational attainment and a pupil poverty measure (Free School Meal Entitlement (FSME)) rather than wholly on FSME. Following the scrutiny and the extensive debates, in the subsequent part of the 2011-16 mandate, the Department effectively ringfenced funding for schools and sought efficiencies / reductions in other parts of the Departmental budget.

The Department of Education also has the 2nd (or sometimes 3rd) largest capital budget of all of the departments in the Northern Ireland Executive – usually around £180m per year. This money is used to build new schools; fund school extensions/improvements and to support school maintenance programmes. The Committee scrutinised and commented on planning and other delays in the new school build programme. In response, the Department introduced the School Enhancement Programme which was designed to support improvements in the schools estate which would not require significant planning approval. At the end of the 2016-17 mandate, the Department was on schedule to complete all of the scheduled spending on the new school build and School Enhancement Programmes.

Policy Development: Policy scrutiny by the **Education Committee** included areas such as: Early Years provision; Home to School Transport; the recommendations of the Marshall Report on preventing child sexual exploitation; employee absence in the education sector; teachers' pensions legislation; teaching and non-teaching redundancy; Signature Projects (nurture units and literacy and numeracy); access to the curriculum for children with vision issues; EU funding opportunities and the internationalisation of the curriculum; Computer-Based Assessment; Levels of Progression; review of GCSEs and A-levels; Food in Schools policy; Sport in Schools policy; and Youth Policy. Policy development by the Education Committee followed more intensive scrutiny on a number of key issues including Area Planning – this was a Departmental policy in line with the Sustainable Schools Policy which was designed to rationalise the schools estate. The Committee undertook a series of stakeholder events and reviewed related practices in Scotland during a Committee visit. The Committee also commissioned a Special Advisor to produce a series of reports on Area Planning. The Committee produced a position paper which was debated in the Assembly highlighting deficiencies in the consultation process; estimates of surplus school places and the absence of co-ordination between different education sectors. In the 2016-17 mandate, the Department issued a revised Area Planning policy for consultation. This made significant changes to the consultation practices to be adopted for Area Plans; the use of the surplus school place calculation and appeared to include assurances in respect of co-ordination across different education sectors.

Inquiries: In 2011-16 the **Committee for Education** undertook a number of inquiries including into: *School Councils; School Improvement and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI); and Shared and Integrated Education*. The **Education Committee's** inquiry into School Improvement and ETI endorsed the need for professional, independent, broadly-based, balanced inspection of schools but urged the Department to enhance the school improvement process and align this with the inspection function, as is the case in other jurisdictions. The Committee recommended that a more collaborative approach between ETI and schools should be adopted and that this would be facilitated by: greater use of 3rd party questionnaires in schools; revised inspection reports (written in plain English for parents while providing more detail for schools); and the use of less pejorative school outcome descriptors – such as “Unsatisfactory” or “Inadequate”. The Committee also recommended that a platform for representative parental consultation should be established by the Department. The Committee felt that this was essential to address sometimes limited parental involvement in the school improvement process. In order to permit ETI the freedom to: highlight good practice; identify improvement actions; set its own agenda for school improvement through inspection; undertake longitudinal studies and comment on Departmental policies, the majority of Committee Members felt that it should be established in statute as independent of the Department of Education – as is the practice in all other jurisdictions in these islands. ETI subsequently adopted many of the recommendations of the report and have taken some actions to improve collaboration by schools with school inspections. The **Education Committee's** inquiry into Shared and integrated Education developed a definition of Shared Education which foregrounded educational benefit but also incorporated the key objectives of community reconciliation and good relations. The Committee also recommended the development of key measures of performance for this growing policy area. The Committee recommended a wide-ranging strategic review of Integrated Education – this has been completed by the Department and is expected to be published in 2017. The Committee's definition of Shared Education was largely included in recent legislation.

Engagement: Education policy is broadly based and related developments can have unexpected consequences for a wide range of stakeholders. The **Education Committee** has used school children's focus groups to develop cogent policy ideas in respect of e.g. tackling cyber-bullying. The Committee has also made use of youth panels in order to consult on the Department's new policy areas relating to children and young people's well-being. The Committee is to develop a parental touchstone group which it will use to gauge the views of parents on educational policy. In addition to the above, the Committee undertook regular informal stakeholder events where representative groups shared their views on the outworking of education policies including in respect of Early Years provision; Special Educational Needs and the Programme for Government.