

## **COUNCIL**

Minutes of an additional meeting of Council held via Dial In facilities on Thursday 19 March 2020 at 12 noon.

**Present:** Mr T Carson (Chair) Dr L Caul  
Dr A Kerr Mrs K O'Hare  
Mrs C Fitzsimons Mrs C Harpur  
Dr N Morton Mr B Wilson  
Mr C McKinney Ms P Slevin  
Mrs P Leitch Mrs S Kirk

Mr J Edwards (Chief Executive)  
Mrs L Scott (Director Finance & Corporate Services)  
Mrs S King (Head of Regulation)

Miss N Kennedy (Manager, Council Secretariat)

### **Introduction**

The Chair welcomed members to the meeting and extended a special welcome to new members of Council: Ms Patricia Slevin; Mrs Paula Leitch and Mrs Samantha Kirk.

### **Apologies**

Apologies were received from Ms R Byrne and Mr R Thompson.

### **Conflict of Interests**

Members confirmed there were no conflict of interests on any of the agenda items.

### **Chair's Business**

The Chair advised that the main item of business was to discuss CCEA's response to COVID-19 and enhancement of arrangements. He advised that views would also be sought on governance arrangements in regards to the conduct of Council and Committee business for the foreseeable future.

He confirmed that the meeting may have to be suspended for a short period of time, in order for the Chief Executive to take a call from the Permanent Secretary to obtain further direction on arrangements under the current circumstances.

### **Governance Arrangements**

The Chief Executive raised the CCEA Corporate matter in relation to working arrangements for Council and its committees. He confirmed that the conduct of meetings was moving to online, dial in or skype to ensure social distancing. Due to the pressure on the education workforce, Education Committee and Regulation Committee business will be consolidated into the main Council agenda for the immediate future.

The Chief Executive advised that Finance and Audit & Risk Assurance Committees are statutory and will go ahead as scheduled. He advised that this will reduce the number of meetings, however Council business will continue and to allow decisions to be made.

The Chair recognised the pressure under which the organisation was operating under and agreed with the suggestion. The scheduled Education Committee meetings would be postponed until future notice and the business incorporated into the main Council meetings.

The Chair sought members views on the suggestion put forward by the Chief Executive. Following discussion, members were content for the Education business to be incorporated into Council. It was also suggested that shorter Council members were held on a monthly basis.

The Chair confirmed that Council meetings would continue on a monthly basis to ensure it fulfilled its responsibilities. He advised that all remote access facilities would be explored to ensure all members can contribute as effectively as possible.

## **Main Business**

### **COVID-19 Enhancement of Arrangements - Corporate**

#### *Health and Safety*

The Chief Executive detailed the range of measures he is currently taking to ensure the health, safety and well-being of all staff. These include safe distance and enabling working from home. He advised that :

- all cloud sharing arrangements were in place;
- the IT team had deployed 170 laptops within 24 hours;
- all key workers have been facilitated to allow working from home;
- a skeleton staff would remain in the building;
- ICT systems will continue to be sustained and supported.

As an additional measure, to try to alleviate concern and anxiety amongst staff, the Chief Executive advised that he, in conjunction with HR, had instigated corporate communications to provide regular updates to staff on corporate decisions and related guidance on COVID-19.

He confirmed that a bid for COVID-19 funding has been submitted to the Department of Education (DE).

Members also noted the significant amount of work undertaken and completed, which included:

- Emergency site testing has taken place in the event that deployment from the building is necessary, however this is unlikely at this point;
- Sick Pay Policy and other personnel matters are being updated in line with government and PHA guidelines.

#### **Governance Arrangements**

The Chief Executive advised that a range of governance arrangements had been put in place to deal with COVID-19 related activity, which included Gold, Silver and Bronze teams. The purpose of the teams was summarised as follows:

- **Gold Team** : The Gold Team Leader (Chief Executive) assumes and retains overall strategic control over Coronavirus impact, and meets on a daily basis.
- **Silver Team** : The Silver Team Leader liaises with all units when developing tactical plans. His role is to chair the silver team group and ensure that all operational units are preparing for Coronavirus in a proportional way against the strategy.

- **Bronze Team** : Working Group for Team Leaders.

### **Communication**

The Chief Executive confirmed that live communications continue throughout the day with evening updates. Specialist support will be brought in to manage Corporate Communications as work continues in association with DE.

*Government* : The Chief Executive confirmed that he is a representative on the DE committee, providing advice to the Minister for Education, and the Permanent Secretary.

*Other Jurisdictions* : The Chief Executive confirmed that he is in regular contact with Awarding Organisations and the Regulators in England and Wales, and is also in contact with the Chief Executive of the State Examinations Commission (SEC) Ireland, to consider a consistent approach on a ROI North/South basis.

### **Finance**

The Chief Executive advised that there is a potential risk emerging around examination fees, in that if the examinations are not taken there will be no income. He confirmed this had been raised with DE and an assurance provided that support will be provided, should the need arise and additional funding required.

The Chair thanked the Chief Executive for the assurance provided on a broad range of issues. He sought clarification on how the Department for Employment (DfE) were being included in communications. The Chief Executive confirmed that DfE are included in the communications with DE, as the primary Department. He assured members that any information in regards to Vocational Qualifications will be issued as required.

The Chair welcomed the support provided by the Permanent Secretary in meeting any financial pressures that arise, and suggested that the Chief Executive follow this up with the Director of Finance (DE).

Members were content with the arrangements in place at this time.

### **COVID-19 Enhancement of Arrangements – Education**

**CV19/20/03**

The Chief Executive confirmed that this situation was fast moving, and had changed since the paper was written (17 March 2020). The paper was used to discuss risks with the UK Regulators, including other risks on the long-term COVID repercussions and options for alternative systems.

He drew attention to the detailed paper on CCEA's, response to COVID-19, in particular the 5 working objectives for mitigating impact on examinations, and consideration of priorities (1-7) detailed on page 3.

He advised that :

- The contingency arrangements for examinations guidance (jointly drawn up by JCQ across the UK), outlines how Awarding Organisations should behave in any given crisis. The guidance has been updated and adapted overtime (and has provided guidance in times of the troubles and G8 arrangements). These are now being adapted to deal with arrangements for COVID-19.
- Emergency legislation being considered at Westminster for the 5<sup>th</sup> Stage scenario. Discussions are also taking place between AOs and Regulators on how the 5<sup>th</sup> Stage scenario can be dealt with.

The Chief Executive drew attention to the *Situation Report Grid* (detailed on page 7 of the paper), and outlined the assessment of contingency planning. He advised that 3 areas were extremely likely :

1. Candidates unable to take examinations (centres open)
2. Centres unable to open
3. Markers unable to mark in time

In testing the contingencies, it became apparent that these would not be sufficient should there be a whole system closure and unavailable markers.

The Chief Executive outlined the following 4 options, in regards to the GCE (A Level) Summer Examinations Series, being considered at this time :

- 1 Close schools but open to allow children to take examinations. Invoke additional examiners to enable children to take examinations in safe environment.
- 2 Delay examination timetable by a small degree (allowing for school closures during summer months).
- 3 Effectively delay the series until the Autumn term, which could have a knock on effect to University start dates (during 2<sup>nd</sup> semester).
- 4 Close schools and move to predictive modelling of grade outcomes with an opportunity for sitting a November diet of examinations. Subjects will be limited, in particular areas where there is no reliable data available.

(This would be possible in Northern Ireland due to stronger candidate data, however not feasible in England as candidates take linear examinations).

The Chief Executive recognised that the 4 options were extreme, unprecedented and vastly complex in terms of technical, mobility and stakeholder perspectives.

All Regulators agreed that it was a Government decision to agree a preferred option.

The Chief Executive drew attention to the high level options outlined on pages 9 – 11 of the paper, and advised that as of 11 am on 18 March 2020, Option 7 was being discussed in terms of contingencies and viability.

## **OPTION 7**

*Estimate grades on historic data available and estimations, including AS and GCSE modular components, and controlled assessment, working with UK colleagues to robustly support predicted grading. Including the inclusion of an Autumn diet for those discontent with statistical grade outcome.*

## **Sequence of Events**

The Chief Executive outlined the following sequence of events in regards to government announcements and decisions:

### ***Wednesday, 18 March 2020***

Welsh Minister took decision to close all schools, and cancelled summer examinations series.

Minister for Education (NI) announced closure of schools, but not the cessation of examinations.

Chief Executive briefed the Chair of CCEA and Permanent Secretary (DE) on the challenging position CCEA was facing due to non-decision on examinations timetable for Northern Ireland.

### ***Thursday 19 March 2020***

Chief Executive Ofqual contacted CE of CCEA to advise that it had been agreed to consider Option 7, however England remained uncomfortable with this option.

The Director of Education was attending a meeting on behalf of the Chief Executive, with the Secretary of State, and it is hoped that some clarity on decisions, as the longer things remain uncertain, the more difficult it would be to manage the public perception of CCEA in regards to reputational damage.

The Chief Executive recognised that it was not possible to provide detailed information, however it was important to reassure the public (and stakeholders) that a range of options are being considered at present.

He advised that QUB, Ulster University, ASCL and representatives from other stakeholder groups in Further Education, were also supportive of Option F. He confirmed that the Universities were supportive, provided their position is respected. It was understood that this position was to continue to progress learners as far as possible (ie original admissions dates for students).

The Chair expressed concern at England's position. The Chief Executive advised that due to the fluidity of the situation, it was challenging to agree an Option, however there was great value in the UK acting together and agreeing a joint approach.

He confirmed that he and the Chief Executive of SEC (Ireland) had agreed to work together to ensure a stronger position during this unprecedented set of circumstances, and to facilitate the 500 learners who were mobile between North and South.

The Chief Executive expressed concern at the timeframe for a decision. He advised that 23 March 2020 was the final deadline where options could be considered, due to the fact that after that, it would not be viable to write second sets of examination papers.

### ***Discussion***

The Chair, and members welcomed the detailed briefing. All members had the opportunity to discuss the wide range of matters covered by the Chief Executive. The following points were raised:

- An agreed position from the 3 jurisdictions would be stronger;
- Resolution to be found as soon as possible to alleviate the anxiety and stress of young people;
- Clarity on position, and decision required;
- Clear and consistent communications to all stakeholders to be provided;
- The need to protect the mental well-being of young people is a priority;
- Clear steer required from Government.

A Council member sought clarification on whether the Council was required to provide formative advice to the Minister for Education, and suggested that Council issue a letter to the Minister outlining its

concerns on any delay in making a decision. He also suggested that Council have a clear statement, should the need arise for Council to defend its position. Members agreed. The Chair asked the Chief Executive to draft a communication, setting out Council's position as soon as possible.

The Chief Executive made reference to G Williamson's speech (Education Minister DfE, England), in regards to the advice provided by the Regulators on a November diet. He advised that the January series would be available for AS students in Northern Ireland.

### **Recommendation and Approval**

He sought support from the Council to support Option F, to proceed on the basis of the advice provided, and should the position change, the paper be updated as appropriate. Members supported and approved **Option F**.

Members sought and received clarification on a significant range of matters, and were content with the explanations provided, in particular, the need for clarity from the Minister for Education to allow CCEA to proceed; and expectations to be managed (in schools); and recognition of what is feasible in the current circumstances.

The Chair asked members to bear in mind that arising out this could be a significant number of examination appeals. Whilst the Council can register strong concerns, he advised that no action could be taken until there was an agreed 3 jurisdiction position.

A Council member raised the logistics and capacity issues for a November diet, and sought clarification on the position with awarding BTEC qualifications in NI. The Chair welcomed these comments and agreed that a decision from the Minister was paramount.

The Chief Executive said there could be issues with examiner vulnerability being long term. He assured members that planning was on a 'worst case scenario' basis. In regards to Vocational Qualifications (VQs), he advised that discussions around these awards being calculated based on continuous assessment, were ongoing. Vocational Awarding Organisations have signalled that this is feasible and will give more assurances for the VQ model. There will be the opportunity to retake units and suppress fees should candidates wish to take additional modules. He confirmed that, at present, the VQ position is safer.

A Council member thanked the Chief Executive for the clear direction provided. He would welcome communication from the 3 jurisdictions on guidance for schools to cater for students in years 11, 12, 13 and 14, and suggested that it was made clear particularly in the NI context as modules have been completed which will form the basis of calculated grades. He expressed concern that this could impact on outcomes for June 2021.

The Chair said that it was important for CCEA to advise stakeholders, that it will take time to provide answers to all issues raised, and ask for recognition of the challenges everyone is facing during this crisis.

At this point in the meeting the Chair advised that the Chief Executive was required to exit to contact the Permanent Secretary, and there was a break in the meeting.

The meeting resumed when the Chief Executive returned.

A Council member sought clarification on whether CCEA had data analytics should Option F be pursued. The Chief Executive explained the background to the query, and advised that CCEA had 2 members of staff who could carry out the work, one was key. He confirmed that further support was required from

the NI Civil Service statisticians to enable the work to be carried out. This was a contingency. He also confirmed that support is available from Ofqual's statistical team if required.

The Chief Executive advised that the Minister for Education would make a statement at 4pm (19 March 2020) where he would ask CCEA to move forward on a calculated grade basis and for all technical solutions to be developed. The summer timetable would not proceed.

Members thanked the Chief Executive for the clarity provided on issues raised. They asked for a clear concise statement to come forward from the Minister, to help alleviate the stress and anxiety of students involved in GCSE, AS and A Levels.

It was also crucial that CCEA make to clear that this is a government decision and that CCEA has advised DE on the risks and reputational damage. The recommendations being put forward by CCEA are for consideration, and ultimately a Ministerial decision to be taken.

The Chair concurred and said it would be made clear that CCEA will implement the decision taken using all the capability and expertise it has to ensure as fair an outcome for all young people involved as possible.

The Chief Executive thanked members for their support. He agreed to keep Council up to date on developments and should there be a shift in strategy, members will be informed.

### **Any Other Business**

The Chair thanked all members for joining the meeting and for their participation. He advised that he would consider the suggestions made for conducting the meetings for Council and its committees in the coming months to ensure they are as efficient and effective as possible using the remote mechanisms.

He said this was the most extreme and serious situation he has dealt with during his 7 years as Chair and stressed the importance of taking into consideration the wider context. He commended the hard work and dedication of staff who are working to achieve the best possible outcomes for everyone concerned.

He confirmed that members would be advised on arrangements for the next Council meeting.

### *Education*

The Chair of the Education Committee asked that the meeting scheduled for 25 March be cancelled. This was agreed.

The Chair confirmed that Education and Regulatory matters would be dealt with in the main Council agenda for the foreseeable future and members would be advised accordingly.

This concluded the business of the meeting.

