

CCEA

Minutes of a Special Council meeting held via Dial-In Facilities on Wednesday 6 May 2020, at 4.00 pm.

Present: Mr T Carson (Chair) Mr RJ Thompson
Mrs C Harpur Mr C McKinney
Ms R Byrne Mrs C Fitzsimons
Dr L Caul Dr A Kerr
Mrs K O'Hare Ms P Slevin
Mrs P Leitch Mr B Wilson

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

Miss N Kennedy (Manager, Council Secretariat)

Apologies

Apologies were received from Mrs S Kirk and Miss M Farragher.

Chair's Business

The Chair thanked everyone for joining the meeting and reminded members of the protocols for participation.

Main Business

Chief Executive's Update – COVID-19

Corporate/Finance/HR/IT/Estates

Finance

The Chief Executive advised that no budget allocation had been received for 2020/21 from the Department of Education. Additional funding of £1.6M has been sought from the COVID-19 emergency and contingency funds to support current related activity and previously outlined financial issues. DE are considering the request.

Human Resources

The Chief Executive was pleased to report that no new COVID-9 related cases had occurred within CCEA's workforce. Sickness absence had decreased by approximately half in the last 3 weeks. Health and well-being initiatives continue to be offered to staff.

ICT

The Chief Executive advised that a significant amount of IT work had been carried out on the new data capture system. He advised that modernisation work has been delayed to focus resources on the development of the new entry and data support systems to ensure they are fully developed. Progress is being monitored.

Estates

The Chief Executive advised that consideration of future easing of restrictions and preparation of the buildings were currently underway. However, there were no immediate plans to return staff to the offices whilst restrictions in Northern Ireland remained in place. He confirmed that any transition to a 'new normal' will be in line with government advice and best practice, and assured members that the continued focus will be the safety of CCEA staff and the continuity of business.

Education System

The Chief Executive advised that he had with the Permanent Secretary and other Arms' Length Body Chief Executives to discuss an 'Education Restart' group. He confirmed as far as he was aware there were, no plans to re-open schools at present.

The Chair suggested it would be prudent for CCEA to move forward on the basis that schools will not re-open until September 2020, and that a phased return could be possible.

The Chief Executive advised that following previous Council meetings, consideration would be given to the requirements of the new DE programme and CCEA contribution in regards to examinations, curriculum and assessment arrangements.

Discussions have also taken place in a 4-Country basis with the Regulatory Chief Executives to consider Summer Examinations 2021 and financial implications 2021/22.

Weekly meetings with the Department of Education (at a senior level) were being held to discuss longer term implications in regards to summer examinations 2021 and 2021/22 financial year.

Members sought and received clarification on a number of related matters and were satisfied with the explanations received.

A Council member welcomed the decrease on sickness absence and asked the Chief Executive to pass on the thanks and appreciation of Council to all staff for their commitment to the work of the organisation during these challenging times. The Chair concurred and he agreed to issue a note of thanks to all staff on behalf of Council.

Awarding Arrangements

The Chief Executive confirmed that the awarding implementation was well underway and increase in resource had been secured from NISRA, and also Alpha Plus, a statistical modelling consultancy group, who will check the model produced by the internal team.

Additional resource has also been provided for the Awarding teams, and a request for further resource is also with CPD for procurement. Regulation has also requested additional statistical resource.

He advised that the models for A Level, GCSE were well underway. The majority of helpdesk queries are now from schools in regards to implementation, and teachers are engaged in requirements for teacher professional judgement.

The two main issues are :

Appeals Process Consultation

A considerable amount of due diligence has been completed on the document. The consultation will go live on Thursday 7 May 2020. Feedback from the consultation to inform the process and a final proposal for the appeals process will come back to Council in advance of issue and technical documentation.

The position in regards to the 4 country status is as follows :

- England : end of Ofqual consultation is approaching with 12500 responses to date.
- Wales : position is similar to England, awaiting closure of the consultation process.
- Scotland : are considering established systems already in place and are waiting on a Ministerial decision on how to proceed.

Private Candidates

The Chief Executive confirmed that considerable guidance has been provided around what is possible in regards to provision for private candidates. This is currently being refined.

Ofqual stated that there would be instances where it would not be possible to accommodate private candidates. Minister Weir also confirmed that this would be the case in Northern Ireland. The CCEA guidance will be adapted accordingly. The Chief Executive assured member that every effort would be made to protect the most vulnerable children.

Future Arrangements

The Chief Executive advised that, in discussion with counterparts in England, Wales and Scotland, there would be challenges to be addressed for Summer 2021 series, whilst carrying forward those encountered at present. England will consider their circumstances, stating that they anticipate a continuation of restrictions for 2020-2021 examinations and that this will have an impact on future years.

The Chief Executive confirmed that he has raised the issue of Summer 2021 with the Department to allow CCEA to begin work on Northern Ireland arrangements for Council consideration. This will include the PHA advice over the longer term, together with challenges and issues that may need to be addressed.

A Council member sought clarification on whether it would be possible to have clarity on the agreed position in regards to the appeals process by 5 June, to ensure teachers can prepare for what constitutes an appeal. The Chair, asked for an appreciation of the exceptional circumstances staff were operating under, and provided an undertaking to providing as much information before 5 June, as possible.

Member agreed that it was important to ensure that a manageable appeals process was put in place, that it could be conducted with integrity and that the information and procedures were as accessible as possible.

A Council member stated that as this was of such significance, it would be preferable if Council had sight of the documentation. The Chief Executive agreed to circulate the consultation document to members.

Regulation

The Chief Executive advised that a considerable amount of work has been completed on General Qualifications and work was being progressed rapidly in regards to vocational qualifications.

DfE has approved that calculated grades are to be used in regards to Essential Skills and an instruction has been received to proceed with work in this area.

Approval has also been received for Occupational Studies in line with GCSE and Entry Level Qualifications for CCEA.

Vocational Qualifications at Level 3 : progress is slower than anticipated, however this is a complex area and CCEA continue to work in partnership awarding organisations and other regulators to issue a consistent message into the system. Concern was expressed at the lack of understanding of the complexities of Vocational Qualification.

The Chief Executive assured members that once decisions are made CCEA will act. He confirmed that where CCEA has full control it has proceeded at pace, however more time is needed when multijurisdictional approaches are required.

He expressed concern at the timescales, in that FE and Training institutes close earlier in Northern Ireland than in England and there is a need to have the process in place to ensure there is no additional pressure on the NI resource; and the issue of results date (August 2020) remains the same. CCEA will maintain this position and has advised AOs accordingly

Clarification was sought on engagement with the Unions. The Chief Executive advised that he met with the Unions on 5 May to outline the awarding approaches. Whilst there were no issues of concern raised, an assurance that multiple centres running similar qualifications could be handled. He agreed to provide updates at regular intervals.

Assessment

The Chief Executive confirmed that no decision had been made on the advice submitted to the Minister of Education on Statutory Assessment and reporting arrangements. He stated that direction was required urgently.

A Council member suggested that it would be helpful if statutory assessment was stood down given the present circumstances.

The Chair agreed to progress this outside of the meeting.

Curriculum

The Chief Executive confirmed that the suite of Home Learning resources are proving successful and were being widely used throughout the system. CCEA continued to collaborate with EA on various programmes of work.

CCEA was in discussion with DE for additional support to develop on-line well-being materials for young people in collaboration across various government departments and the PHA. This was welcomed.

Communications

A significant range of communications has been produced on the new awarding arrangements. Good feedback has been received on the FAQs and 1200 views have been recorded on the video content for the new approach to grading.

Communications are currently being drafted for Occupational Studies, Essential Skills and Entry Level.

The Chair said he was reassured by the variety of communications available, with members welcoming the availability of podcasts.

Safe Closure of Previous Exam Series

The Chief Executive advised that the January and March 2020 had been closed out. One issue arising was the delay on issue of results.

This concluded the Chief Executive's briefing to Council

Any Other Business

Clarification was sought on the status of the Internal Audit service provider. The Chief Executive confirmed approvals to proceed from CPD had been received and that this was now progressing quickly.

MS Teams

The Chair confirmed that testing and training had been conducted on the MS teams solution with 1-1 sessions with a number of Council members.

A group test has also been organised with the intention of running the Council Briefing meeting on 13 May using this mechanism.

Further discussions on how to progress Council business short to medium term, would be held at the meeting on 21 May 2020.

Date of Next Meeting

The Chair thanked members and the Chief Executive for their input into the briefing and advised that the next update would be provided on Wednesday 13 May 2020 at 4pm.