

CCEA

Minutes of a Special Council meeting held via Dial-In Facilities on Wednesday 8 April 2020, at 1.30 pm.

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

Mr J Edwards (Chief Executive)

Miss N Kennedy (Manager, Council Secretariat)

Apologies

Apologies were received from Dr N Morton and Mr B Wilson.

Chair's Business

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

Contact with Department of Education (DE)

The Chair advised he had been in contact with the Director of Finance in regards to CCEA's bid for Covid-19 funding, and with the Permanent Secretary in relation to the advice regarding options for alternative assessment arrangements as discussed by Council on 1 April. He stated that the Permanent Secretary had not, as yet had sight of the paper, and expressed concern at the delay in expediting this important matter.

Main Business

Chief Executive's Update – COVID-19 Contingencies

General Qualifications

The Chief Executive referred to the options discussed by Council at its meeting on 1 April 2020, in particular the AS qualification. He advised that the paper had been refined in light of the points put forward by members, and confirmed that Option 4 had been submitted. One of the key advantages was alignment to Qualifications Wales. There was also to be considered the technical and resource challenges associated with the delivery of this option.

He confirmed that the other Options remained as endorsed by Council.

Update

The Chief Executive confirmed that discussions with DE were ongoing, and as of 2 April 2020 DE was clear in the information provided and direction of travel. However since then DE had undertaken stakeholder engagement on the Options provided by CCEA. Following the conclusion of the stakeholder engagement Ministerial direction would be sought. He confirmed that only the primary options were being considered by DE.

The Chief Executive confirmed that he had engaged with the Teacher Unions (NITC, ASCL, NAHT and GBA), and there was a broad understanding of the options and a recognition of the challenges ahead.

He explained that he had stated to DE that, with all options put forward, there would be challenges for CCEA to deliver.

The main challenge is for CCEA to be able to obtain more information on the statistical model for the A2 component. Capturing teacher judgement data is a priority and the timescales are compressed and limited.

The Chief Executive stated that a decision from the Minister on Northern Ireland's position was required as a matter of urgency. He confirmed that guidance for Heads of Centres was ready for issue with supporting documentation and communication currently being drafted.

He expressed concern that a fundamental delay beyond Thursday 9 April, would push the decision beyond the Easter bank holiday. This would be challenging for CCEA as the general perception is that CCEA is the cause of the delay.

The Chair thanked the Chief Executive for the update.

Member recognised that officers had fulfilled their responsibilities and the delay in announcing the options for assessment arrangements in the absence of an examinations series was beyond CCEA's control.

A Council member sought clarification on whether there had been any indication of a Ministerial announcement before Easter.

The Chair advised that in discussions with the Permanent Secretary, it was hoped that the Minister would make an announcement on 9 April, however, this was dependent on the submission being progressed by the sponsoring team. He confirmed that he had written to the Permanent Secretary stressing the urgency of the advice being presented to the Minister.

The Chair wished to place on record his dissatisfaction and concern at the length of time taken by senior officials to progress this critical issue, and concluded that he felt the matter was not being treated as urgent.

The Chief Executive said he met with DE on Monday 6 April, and confirmed the announcement would be 9 April. He wished to place on record that had articulated that a delay was not helpful and that decisions were required urgently to allow CCEA to continue with the work, and more importantly to provide an assurance to the system and learners.

A Council member sought clarification on the delay in the announcement. The Chief Executive confirmed that DE were processing the advice provided as a Ministerial Submission and had embarked on stakeholder testing to support the submission. This has slowed down the whole process, however the testing should be concluded today (8 April 2020), and it was hoped that the submission would be finalised and presented to the Minister.

He wished to place on record that DE was made fully aware of the options following the Council meeting on 1 April 2020.

Council members commended the extensive work carried out to date, and thanked the Chief Executive for the reassurance.

Clarification was sought on whether any action should be taken by the Council to assist the Chief Executive in pressing upon DE that a decision is required urgently. The Chair suggested that he continue to make representations, expressing the concern of Council, to the Permanent Secretary, of the impact the delay is having on the system and learners.

Members were content with this approach.

Vocational Qualifications (VQs)

The Chief Executive advised that the awarding of vocational qualifications was more diverse and complex in nature. This was due to the significant amount of Awarding Organisations who offer VQs.

He confirmed that Ofqual wished to vary the regulatory conditions, removing restrictions to allow AOs to adapt or move to estimation of grades. A submission is currently with the Secretary of State in England and it was hoped that an announcement would be made on 8 April. Following the decision CCEA will follow suit.

The Chief Executive stated he had advised the Department for the Economy (DfE) NI to seek guidance from DfE (England) to allow CCEA to progress.

He outlined the situation in regards to the Essential Skills and Occupational Studies qualifications, and confirmed that issues of parity were still being considered. An announcement would not be made until these had been resolved.

The Chief Executive expressed concern that a decision on Level 3 awarding advice was required as CCEA was running out of time to take the necessary action to ensure awards are made. He wished to place on record he had flagged all of the issues with Department of the Economy at a meeting earlier on 8 April, advising them of the current position.

It was hoped that, once the regulatory criteria has been considered, progression will be made at a fast pace.

He expressed concern that some AOs could act in a way that would grow markets or increase grade distributions. This would be reviewed carefully by the Head of Regulation to consider any potential impact for Northern Ireland.

The Chair thanked the Chief Executive for the update.

Clarification was sought on whether schools had received further detail on BTEC qualifications. The Chief Executive confirmed that these would be covered under the changes to the regulatory conditions. Once released, Pearson will issue the guidance on how grades and estimated. He stated that this will be only on the condition if there is a relaxation of the controls.

Members recognised the importance of parity and decisions were required as soon as possible.

The Chief Executive assured members that in updating DE, CCEA has been very clear in stressing the pressure on schools at this time.

Statutory Assessment

The Chief Executive confirmed that arrangements had been put in place to alleviate the statutory assessment. This was viewed as a technicality due to the well-known issues around 'action short of strike'.

He advised that advice had been issued to DE. A Ministerial direction is required to enact the advice and close out the issue.

Curriculum

The Chief Executive confirmed that work continued in the production of materials and resources suitable for home learning. This work is being progressed in conjunction with DE, EA and CCMS. The materials will be launched following the Easter holidays.

Members were content with the information provided.

Corporate/Finance

The Chief Executive advised that a 24 hour deadline had been issued in which CCEA were required to submit a bid for additional funds from the COVID-19 scheme. He confirmed that a bid had been submitted which covered the full range of scenarios across the organisation. He expressed concern at the unlikelihood of the bid being approved.

The Chief Executive also registered his concern at the current position, in that : *CCEA has not received a budget for 2020-2021 from DE, or COVID-19 Contingency Funds.* He wished to place on record that time is fast approaching when additional funding and support will be required.

NISRA have lent CCEA an amount of funding, which have covered some eventualities.

The Chair confirmed that during a discussion with the Permanent Secretary (PS) he had received confirmation that the bid for COVID-19 funding was live, and was currently under consideration by the Department of Finance, (other funding streams were also being explored with a view to supporting the examinations). He also advised that the PS had recognised the urgent requirement of the funding, and felt reassured at this acknowledgement.

The Chair would continue to make representations to the PS to secure the funding required.

Members sought and received clarification in regards to the following:

- Examination fees, payments to examining teams and markers; and
- Support from the teacher unions in regards to statutory assessment.

The Chair asked members to take into consideration the fact that CCEA was operating under extremely exceptional circumstances, with a limit on what can be produced/answered at short notice. He stated that it would be welcomed if DE would allow CCEA to continue with the work required for the examinations.

A Council member said it was importance to take cognisance of the staff who are working long hours to maintain the operations of CCEA.

The Chief Executive recognised, and commended the commitment and substantial work completed by his staff, at a high level, in the provision of the information for the Department, and in other areas of CCEA business. He was mindful of the hours some members of staff were working, and assured members this would be monitored. He stated that he would be encouraging staff to take the statutory holidays over the Easter break.

Members wished to place on record their thanks to the Chief Executive and his team for the significant amount of work being undertaken in these exceptional circumstances.

General

A Council member stated it was regrettable that the Minister had not issued a statement. The absence of an announcement continued to cause considerable pressure on schools and CCEA. He recognised that CCEA had fulfilled its obligations correctly and appropriately, and that decisions were beyond its control. He commended the Chair for approaching and seeking assurances from the Permanent Secretary.

The Chair assured members he would continue contact with the Permanent Secretary until matters had been resolved.

His main concern was CCEA as an organisation and its ability to respond to the direction provided by the Minister. Whilst recognising CCEA was best placed to do this, he stated that the external challenges facing the organisation were significant and needed to be addressed.

Any Other Business

The Chair sought clarification from the Chief Executive as to whether it would be beneficial for Council to receive an update on Wednesday 15 April. The Chief Executive was content to continue to update members on a weekly basis, to ensure they were kept informed of developments and issues as they arise.

Due to conflicting priorities, a request was made to review the start time of the meetings to allow as much Council participation as possible. The Chief Executive agreed to discuss this outside of the meeting.

Date of Next Meeting

The next weekly update was scheduled for Wednesday 15 April 2020.

The Chair thanked the Chief Executive and members for their participation in the meeting.

The meeting concluded at 2.15 pm.