



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Education

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

General Teaching Council
for Northern Ireland:
Department of Education

8 September 2021

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Chris Lyttle (Chairperson)
Mr Pat Sheehan (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Nicola Brogan
Mr Robbie Butler
Mrs Diane Dodds
Mr Harry Harvey
Mr Daniel McCrossan
Mr Justin McNulty

Witnesses:

Mr Alan Boyd	Department of Education
Ms Alison Chambers	Department of Education

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I welcome from the Department of Education Alison Chambers, the director of promoting collaboration and tackling disadvantage —

Ms Alison Chambers (Department of Education): Good morning, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): — and Alan Boyd, the head of the teacher education team.

Mr Alan Boyd (Department of Education): Good morning, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): You are very welcome, folks. Thanks for being with us today to provide a short update on the General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI).

Ms Chambers: Thank you, Chair. In our written statement, we have sought to provide the Committee with a clear synopsis of the multiple delays in GTCNI's teacher registration processes that have arisen since we last gave evidence, in March of this year. It is deeply regrettable that those have only grown in number and severity over the summer period. Clearly, that does not reflect well on the operational effectiveness of an already troubled body.

We understand that the Committee is also keen to receive an update from the Department on the outcome of the independent effectiveness review of GTCNI's council and committees. Although we are happy to answer members' questions as fully as possible, we put on record from the outset that the effectiveness review is not yet finalised and has not yet been presented to the Minister, so there will be significant limitations on how much we can say about it.

Given the media coverage and correspondence that the issue of teacher registration delays continues to attract, we are sure that members have many questions on the matter, and we are happy to move to taking questions immediately, Chair.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks very much for that. We appreciate it. It is obviously a priority issue for everybody involved in education.

Members, if you wish to ask questions, please raise your hand using the virtual mechanism. I do not intend to call everyone at this stage.

What is your assessment of the impact of the significant delays in teacher registration on the delivery of education, particularly in the current context of numerous cases of self-isolation?

Ms Chambers: When the issue of newly qualified teachers was brought to our attention on 19 August, we immediately instructed GTCNI to remedy it. In past years, it would have telephoned all the newly qualified teachers and taken their registration fee over the phone, but, when it moved to the new IT system, GTCNI decided this year to try to automate the process, and, unfortunately, that led to delays. As of now, however, 439 of the 517 newly qualified teachers' applications have been processed, and they will have their registration number. Seventy-eight have not yet applied, but that could very well be because they have taken up employment elsewhere, and 28 of those registered are currently in employment. We understand that there are still five people in the position of having been made an offer to take up a post without having a registration number, and we have asked GTCNI to prioritise those cases as a matter of urgency.

GTCNI has 559 applications from outside Northern Ireland, 282 of which are complete and 272 of which are live, but, of those, 111 were received only in August. GTCNI is assuring us that it will try as hard as it can to stay within the six- to eight-week timeline that it advises applicants of on its website.

There are 27 rest-of-the-world applications, 19 of which are started and potentially have incomplete information. Those applications are more complex to address, because they may be coming from such countries as Australia and New Zealand, and there is a four- to six-month window for processing them. Five people are being delayed in taking up employment, and that has an immediate impact on the education system.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I am sure that members will be interested in what the cause of the delay has been and in whether any specific action needs to be taken to remedy that. That will be covered in questions. Pat Sheehan and Daniel McCrossan have raised their hand. Other members who wish to ask a question should feel free to raise their hand, but I do not necessarily intend to call everyone.

Mr Sheehan: Thank you, Chair and witnesses. I did not catch whether you said that the review of the effectiveness of the GTCNI has been presented to the Minister or whether it is going to be presented shortly. Will you clarify that for me?

Ms Chambers: It has not been presented to the Minister yet. We took receipt of the report in mid-August. We have been going through the process of making sure that all the requirements of the contract have been met. We have identified with Baker Tilly Mooney Moore, for its reconsideration, some areas that we do not feel are as clear as they ought to be. It is working through that process. Once that is finalised, we will report its conclusions and recommendations to the Minister for her consideration. Until those steps are complete, we cannot really comment on the detail of the report. I can, however, give you a flavour of the methodology that Baker Tilly Mooney Moore took forward in producing the report, if that would be helpful.

Mr Sheehan: Please do.

Ms Chambers: In the course of the review, consultants held one-to-one meetings with all current and former council members, the registrar and departmental representatives. Those interviewed were able to provide follow-up written submissions and documentary evidence, if they so wished. The consultants attended committee and council meetings to hear at first hand how they go forward. They also took forward a board-effectiveness survey, which was distributed to all council members and executive staff. There was a really high return rate for that, and it has been informative. They also engaged with Wales's Education Workforce Council, the General Teaching Council for Scotland and the Teaching Council for Ireland so that GTCNI could be benchmarked against those directly

comparable organisations. In addition, they undertook an extensive desktop review of council papers, of internal/external correspondence and of records of communications between the council and the Department. We feel that the consultants followed a structured, systematic approach, which, we believe, will ensure that the report, when finalised, will provide a robust and objective evidence base for us on which to take action.

Mr Sheehan: Thanks for that, Alison. Do you have a timeline for the completion of the report?

Ms Chambers: It is currently with Baker Tilly Mooney Moore, and we are waiting for the finalised report to come forward. When it does, we will organise for it to be presented to the Minister and for a discussion to be had with her on the way forward. We hope that that will be as soon as possible.

Mr Sheehan: Has it indicated how long it will take to rectify whatever problems there are?

Ms Chambers: I do not expect that it will take more than a couple of weeks.

Mr Sheehan: Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I will bring in Daniel McCrossan, followed by Robbie Butler to finish.

Mr McCrossan: I have a question around the edges of this. Is it only as a result of an IT problem that we see teachers not being registered, or do other problems exist?

Ms Chambers: There are a couple of issues, as mentioned in the briefing paper. The first issue came to light when the Department for Education in England wrote to GTCNI to advise it that its access to the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) would be removed by the end of March 2021. That had an impact on the processing of referrals to DBS from April, May and June, which led to a bit of a backlog until a solution could be put in place. I will ask Alan to outline the steps that we took to make sure that a solution was found.

Mr Boyd: The Department was made aware only on 10 May of the issue with access to the Disclosure and Barring Service for GTCNI. We immediately contacted the General Teaching Council to enquire about what was going on. DBS checks are an essential requirement before GTCNI can complete registration of any applicants. The access issue did not immediately impact on any of this year's cohort of upcoming graduates training in Northern Ireland, because GTC goes through a process of preregistration with those individuals, and they had already been DBS-checked before that matter arose. It immediately impacted, however, on any applications being received from GB-trained teachers or from those who come through the rest-of-the-world route. It was therefore unable to secure those checks, and the processing could not complete.

We immediately engaged directly with the Department for Education in England to try to see whether there was any workaround. It said that there was not and that it was for its own legal authority to provide access to the information. We subsequently engaged with GTC, Access NI, the Education Authority (EA) and various other stakeholders to try to identify a resolution. In fact, we had at least six conference calls over the next few weeks. We worked separately with the EA and identified one alternative workaround mechanism that could have been put in place. It was slightly time-consuming and complex, however. Fortunately, in mid-June, DBS committed to directly accepting the names and details of those aspiring teachers and said that it would conduct the checks itself and provide clearance details back to GTCNI.

That is an interim solution, but it is one that is ongoing. Our feedback from GTC has been that that has been working well up to now. The backlog is clear, and it is processing new applicants weekly with the Disclosure and Barring Service. As far as we are concerned, that particular issue should therefore now be well and truly addressed.

Mr McCrossan: I was just about to ask whether that is a permanent solution, but you said that it is an interim one, so that answers my question. Is there a permanent solution in sight? Do you know what it would look like? Overall, did GTCNI contribute to the problem in any way or was it something well beyond its control?

Ms Chambers: It was outside of its control completely. It was quite unforeseen, but we worked quite quickly to try to put a solution in place. It is an interim solution, because DBS wanted to take a couple

of months to see what the workload would look like. My understanding, however, is that GTCNI wants to put in place a permanent solution with DBS so that it can pay it for its time. It just needed a couple of months to work out what its staff costs would look like, but we anticipate that that will be the way forward.

Mr McCrossan: OK. Thank you very much.

Mrs Dodds: You may not be able to do this, but can you provide us with any flavour of what the benchmarking against other parts of the United Kingdom looked like?

Ms Chambers: Unfortunately, we cannot comment on that at this point, but, when the Minister has had time to consider the report, we will be happy to come back to give the Committee a flavour of the outcome.

Mrs Dodds: Thank you. That would be useful.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Sorry, Robbie, your hand must not have been raised on the screen momentarily. I will bring you in.

Mr Butler: It is not a problem. To be fair, it is only fitting that I go after Diane.

Will you give us an update on any involvement, if there is any, that the Department has with GTCNI in any of its functions at the moment and on the status of special measures?

Ms Chambers: The GTCNI is still in special measures. There has not been sufficient movement *[Inaudible owing to poor sound quality]* that would allow us to consider taking it out of special measures. The monthly oversight meetings continue with the sponsor branch and GTCNI executive staff. We also still have monthly oversight meetings with the chair and the chief executive. We have worked extensively over the summer on each of the issues that we have discussed to try to assist GTCNI in finding a resolution to them. We are therefore still in daily contact.

Mr Butler: OK. Is there any update on the regulatory function of GTCNI?

Ms Chambers: No. The position remains the same as it was in March. To my knowledge, no further regulation cases have come forward. Unfortunately, the screening exercise that you were advised of in March has not yet been taken forward. The council was asked to submit volunteers to sit on those screening panels to assist the chief executive in screening the 38 referrals. We had a number of resignations and withdrawals from council, however, so some of the members who volunteered are no longer available. The chair and the vice chair have committed to working with the chief executive on screening those referrals. They should have had them completed by now, but, unfortunately, the staff who were going to work on the preparation of the paperwork for the screening exercise are involved in the registration process. We are pressing the chief executive and the chair to do the screening as soon as possible. I have advised them that, if there are going to be any further delays, they should advise the Committee, because they did commit to having that exercise completed as soon as possible.

Mr Butler: I would appreciate that. There are outstanding issues that have been raised with GTCNI by individuals who are looking for resolutions. That exercise has an impact on those cases, so I just ask that you do everything in your power to make sure that it is time-bound and that there is a fixed point that it cannot go beyond. Those issues need to be sorted out, and the delay is having an impact on individuals.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): I have Justin McNulty and then Nicola Brogan to finish.

Mr McNulty: *[Inaudible.]*

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Justin, you are on mute.

Mr McNulty: I like talking to myself, Chair.

Hi, Alison and Alan. I hope that there is an awareness in the Department and particularly in GTC of the distress that the teacher registration issue has caused many newly qualified teachers, who are very excited about getting into the workforce. I know of one young lady who was talking about going onto benefits in order to get support and the money that she needs to survive. That is the level of distress that the issue has caused some people, and I feel strongly about it. I am curious as to how you two have been left to try to clean up after the issue came to pass.

Ms Chambers: In what regard, sorry?

Mr McNulty: In regard to your roles in the Department. Your job title is "director of promoting collaboration and tackling disadvantage". How come this has been put on your desk?

Ms Chambers: One of the areas in a directorate that I have responsibility for is teacher education. As part of that, Alan is head of the sponsor branch that is responsible for GTCNI. That is just one of my directorates: I also have shared education, integrated education, Irish-medium education and tackling educational disadvantage. I think that I said in March that GTCNI consumes an awful lot of my time for such a small arm's-length body. That is why we are intervening directly: to assist it in any way that we can to overcome some of the issues that it has faced this summer.

Mr McNulty: Alison, I love your job title, and I am annoyed to hear that a lot of your time has been consumed with trying to clear up another arm's-length body's mess, when it should be able to handle things on its own. One of your job roles is tackling disadvantage, so the really important part of your job is not getting as much energy and focus as it could or should be getting, because you are off trying to clean up somebody else's mess. Is that the reality?

Ms Chambers: I spend an inordinate amount of time on GTCNI issues, alongside the meetings, but I make sure that I spend enough time on the other areas. I am not ignoring any of my workload.

Mr McNulty: I hear you, Alison. From your voice, I can hear that you are determined, focused and passionate about that, but you cannot juggle so many balls at the same time. Your focus may be distracted from what it should be on. Thank you very much for your evidence, Alison, and I appreciate your giving us your time.

Ms Chambers: Thank you.

Ms Brogan: Thank you, everyone. I have a quick question about newly qualified teachers and registration. For the Irish sector and Irish-medium education can you explain the classification of applications for those coming from the South? Are theirs considered to be rest-of-the-world applications, or is there any recognition of their special circumstances?

Ms Chambers: They are considered to be rest-of-the-world applications at present, because of Brexit. We understand that there are 11 applications from newly qualified teachers in the South. GTCNI assures us that they will not take the four to six months that rest-of-the-world applications typically take, because they are not complicated. As long as all the paperwork and associated documentation is provided, those should be taken forward in the six-to-eight-week time frame, as is the case with GB applicants.

Ms Brogan: They should definitely be given special recognition and consideration, because they are so valued, especially in the North. That is grand. Thank you.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks for the update, officials. As you have said, we will return to the independent effectiveness review in due course. We look forward to it.

Sorry, but I have just seen Harry Harvey's hand raised. Do you want to come in before we finish, Harry?

Mr Harvey: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate it. I wonder whether there is any difficulty, over and above the difficulties being experienced at present as a result of the issues, in getting newly qualified teachers onto the substitute teacher register.

Ms Chambers: There was a hiccup with that, but I will let Alan take you through the detail.

Mr Boyd: As the Committee is well aware, the Education Authority runs the substitute teacher register on behalf of all our schools. The Northern Ireland substitute teacher register (NISTR) database links to an online system, by which principals are able to scrutinise available teachers and identify staff to fill short-term vacancies.

NISTR registration is a process distinct from GTCNI registration. Effectively, the EA acts as a de facto employer for all substitute teachers, so it has its own process by which it registers teachers. It goes through a lot of the standard pre-employment checks, such as an enhanced Access NI check, before it will put a person's details live on the system.

In the week commencing 16 August, we were made aware that the EA had begun to receive calls from newly qualified teachers who were still awaiting confirmation of their NISTR registration. When the EA looked into that, it became apparent that an automatic data link between its system and the GTC's teacher registration system had been broken by the IT system upgrade, which had been activated and made live at the start of July.

The consequence of that was that, even where a teacher's GTC registration was confirmed, the NISTR database no longer automatically received that information. In some cases, that might have been the final check that the EA was waiting to complete before it made the individual's record live for bookings.

When the EA became aware of that, it acted quickly. It first met GTC and the IT providers for both the EA and GTCNI on 18 August to identify the problem, which was not of the EA's making. The IT upgrade by GTCNI had simply disrupted a long-established system. In the interim, the EA identified a workaround that allowed its staff to check manually, person by person, exactly what the status was, and it moved quickly to code the necessary corrections to the database link. By 27 August, the required software changes were not only made but had been thoroughly tested and made live. The two databases are therefore now synchronised once again.

Further to that, our only comment is to say that it is a source of concern that that database link was not identified and planned for from the outset as part of the IT upgrade process. That is not a situation of the Department's or the EA's making, however.

Mr Harvey: That is an excellent answer. Thank you very much. At least it is sorted now.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Thanks for that question, Harry, which gave the Department the opportunity to give a full explanation. I appreciate that.

Mr Harvey: No problem.

The Chairperson (Mr Lyttle): Members and officials, I will draw the session to a close. Thank you very much for your update, officials, and we look forward to engaging with you again on this important matter in due course.

Ms Chambers: Thank you.

Mr Boyd: Thank you.