

DÁIL ÉIREANN

AN COISTE UM ACHAINÍOCHA ÓN BPOBAL

COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC PETITIONS

Dé Céadaoin, 12 Iúil 2017

Wednesday, 12 July 2017

Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 1.30 p.m.

The Joint Committee met at 1.30 p.m.

Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

| Teachtaí Dála / Deputies | Seanadóirí / Senators |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Shane Cassells, | Colette Kelleher, |
| Martin Heydon, | Diarmuid Wilson. |
| Denise Mitchell, | |
| Eugene Murphy, | |
| Brendan Ryan. | |

Teachta / Deputy Sean Sherlock sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

Business of Joint Committee

Chairman: Apologies have been received from Senator Jerry Buttimer.

Members are requested to ensure their mobile phones are turned off completely or switched to flight mode for the duration of the meeting. It is not sufficient to leave them in silent mode as they will interfere with the broadcasting and recording systems.

I propose that we go into private session to deal with a number of housekeeping matters. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The committee went into private session at 1.35 p.m. and resumed in public session at 2.17 p.m.

Chairman: We are now in public session to record the decisions of the committee. The first petition for consideration is No. P000024/16 from Mr. Thomas Mackey. The petitioner is of the view that the criteria for qualification for a primary medical certification is outdated and does not provide a criteria for upper limb amputees to qualify for the service. It is proposed that we write to the Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure and Reform expressing our concerns as to the rigid eligibility criteria of the scheme and highlighting to him the number of complaints received by the Ombudsman on this issue and the recommendation of the 2002 report. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The next petition is No. P00001/17 from Oisín Turakhia relating to the responsible service of alcohol. It is proposed that we correspond with the petitioner and close the petition. Is that agreed? Agreed. The next petition is No. P00002/17 from Mr. Thomas Geraghty on behalf of the Public Service Executive Union, entitled civil rights for civil servants. It is proposed to correspond once again with the Minister acknowledging his detailed response, outlining that the committee welcomes his intentions to introduce a public sector standards commissioner under the proposed public sector standards Bill, requesting that he keeps the committee informed on progress on this matter and outlining that the petition will remain open with the committee, which intends to working closely with a public sector standards commissioner on addressing any gaps in the current circular and codes on this matter, and to forward a copy of the response from the Minister to the petitioner and advise of the above steps being taken. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The next petition is No. P00007/17 on the eradication of homework for children in primary school. The petitioner seeks to amend the policy of the Department of Education and Skills and eradicate homework for children in primary school. The petitioner is of the opinion that there is little educational benefit to homework and that homework can be a cause of stress and frustration for children. Having discussed this, it is proposed to forward a copy of the response from the Department of Education and Skills to the petitioner, seek her views on the response from the Department of Education and Skills, leave the petition open and see what the response is. Is that agreed? Agreed.

Deputy Shane Cassells: Rather than seek the eradication of homework at primary level, we should be fostering a love of education. Education does not simply exist within the constraints of 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. but continues after that. At a time when young children are exposed more than ever to iPads, iPhones and all of the social media, the one thing we should be doing is reading to children at night. I say that as a parent and it is what I try to do when I am home from the Houses of the Oireachtas. Fostering a love of language, whether through Irish or

English, and developing children's communication skills are things all parents in Ireland could do. What is on a curriculum should not restrain parents from doing that and fostering the love of reading and writing. It costs nothing. At a time when iPhones and iPads are, in a significant way, reversing young children's abilities, we should be fostering reading and writing. I encourage that in the context of the debate.

Senator Colette Kelleher: While there is merit in what the Deputy said, it is equally the case that children need time to play. They spend long hours in school and there needs to be good value from the homework they undertake. It is important to have balance in children's lives. While they must, of course, learn, they must also play because they are children.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: As one who constantly got into trouble with teachers and my parents for not having my homework done as a young fellow, I would like to see this issue discussed. I do not agree with the word "eradicate" in the context of homework. We have to take into account what Senator Kelleher and Deputy Cassells said which is that this is really changing the goalposts. The error I see is that children spend six or seven hours in a classroom doing a great deal of what is in essence homework. They sit at a desk writing and reading. They come home, have a break, eat dinner and are then back into it for up to two hours. The amount of homework given by teachers in primary schools in particular is over the top. I referred to changing the goalposts and Deputy Cassells mentioned getting children away from mobile phones and computers. Perhaps they could do something about the environment and controlling litter. It could be on the seasons and focus on different things. That should be part of their homework. Some very good comments were made by my colleagues.

Chairman: We have agreed a process on this one and it will remain open. We are all agreeable to that, so I will move on. The next item is petition No. P000010/17 from Ms Pauline Bleach on public consultation in the planning process. There are two aspects to the petition which seeks to make public consultation a legal requirement and to account for 20% of outcomes in planning decisions and to create an independent arbiter of facts and process with power to order revisions or reruns using correct processes and facts. It is proposed to forward a copy of the response from the Department of Housing, Planning, Community and Local Government to the petitioner and to close the petition. Is that agreed? Agreed.

The last petition for consideration is petition No. P00023/17 from Ms Judith Dunphy and Mr. Shane Clarke seeking the opening of an autism spectrum disorder, or ASD, unit in all primary and secondary schools. The petition outlines that parents often have to bring their children to other counties, towns or locations which are miles away from their homes to access schools with ASD classes. We propose to correspond once again with the Department asking it to outline the criteria required for a school to qualify for an ASD class, the steps it takes to ensure there are ASD places for eligible primary schools and statistics on the geographical locations of all new ASD units in the past five years. We propose to correspond with Autism Ireland and other autism advocacy groups to ascertain their views as to whether there is a need for ASD classes in all mainstream schools and if they have evidence of same. We will forward a copy of the response from the Department to the petitioners, advise them of the further steps being taken by the committee and outline that the petition will remain open.

Senator Colette Kelleher: There is certainly a gap in access to education for some children with autism. Children with autism are, in essence, being denied their right to a good education. There is a particular issue in the transition between primary and secondary school and it would be useful to get good information on that. I refer, for example, to the Cork autism education gap where the difference between the number of places at primary school level and secondary

school is 234. The National Council for Special Education has been seeking additional powers to prevent schools having an effective veto to rule out an autism class without due regard to the demand in a particular geographic area. It would be helpful to get information on that.

Deputy Shane Cassells: I echo Senator Kelleher's point on the gap that exists. We should also take account of the fact that educational facilities in the locations have changed over the last decade because of changing demographics and settlement patterns, which is only going to continue over the next ten to 20 years. That has impacts on special education provision and the demand for autism units. This definitely requires further examination.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: I agree with my colleagues. I come to this as someone with a little grand-niece and a nephew-in-law with autism. While I pay tribute to the system for the good work it does, parents are unbelievable in these situations. Great work is going on at primary school level. It has come on in leaps and bounds but the Senator is right that there is a gap in what is available at secondary level. We must be aware of rural parts of the country where people may lose out because they are a long way from a school with autism provision. This definitely deserves further discussion which I support.

Chairman: The contention in the petition is that parents should not have to bring their children miles to avail of education. It is very pertinent that the committee would seek to interrogate why that is and try to influence a proper outcome for affected families. We are all too aware of families who are adversely affected by the situation in which they find themselves. I want to get the committee's formal agreement to keep the petition open.

Deputy Eugene Murphy: From speaking to parents, they do not necessarily want a unit in every single school. What they want is one that is not six, eight or ten miles away.

Chairman: Proximity is key. Some logic must be applied. Is it agreed to keep the petition open? Agreed. There are no further petitions to consider today.

The joint committee adjourned at 2.30 p.m. *sine die*.