

An Ceann Comhairle

Seomra 39
Foirgnimh na Parlaiminte
Baile Lios na Scáth
Cnoc an Anfa
Béal Feirste, BT4 3XX

Guthán: +44 (0) 28 9052 1130
r-phost: speakersoffice@niassembly.gov.uk



The Speaker

Room 39
Parliament Buildings
Ballymiscaw
Stormont
Belfast, BT4 3XX

Tel: +44 (0) 28 9052 1130
email: speakersoffice@niassembly.gov.uk

To: All Assembly Members

15 January 2021

Dear Member

Update on Managing Assembly Business in the Context of COVID-19

You will be aware that the Assembly returns to plenary sittings next week amidst a public health picture which continues to give us all concern and the return of strict restrictions which seek to protect our entire community.

While the Assembly has a vital role at this time, it is important that the management of Assembly business should also seek to respond to these serious circumstances, the public health message and the need to protect Members and staff as much as possible. I have therefore been involved in a range of discussions in the past week and I want to update Members.

At its meeting earlier this week, the Business Committee agreed to limit plenary business during the current restrictions. Private Members' Motions and Adjournment debates will not be scheduled. Given the time left in this mandate, it was agreed that it was important that legislation (both Executive and non- Executive Bills) continue to be dealt with.

In relation to Assembly Questions, a new Question Time rota for oral questions was already scheduled to begin next week (with a move from four Question Times per week to three). This will in itself reduce the frequency of ministerial attendance to the level before the number of departments was reduced. This is an issue which the Business Committee may revisit.

The Committee on Procedures has been progressing the matter of remote participation in plenary business over recent months and I understand that it is due to give it further consideration next week. I also raised this issue with the Business Committee this week.

There is now agreement in principle among the parties to move to facilitate remote participation in plenary sittings and I have communicated that broad position to the Committee on Procedures to assist its further deliberations on the matter.

Assembly Commission officials have carried out the planning and scoping work to procure and install the necessary equipment. I hope this will minimise any delay between any decision the Committee on Procedures and the Assembly might take and such changes being implemented.

In many other institutions, while their plenary business has continued either in person or in hybrid format, their committees have moved to entirely virtual meetings. Members will be aware that provision has now been in place for some time now for committee business to be conducted entirely remotely and a number of fully virtual meetings have taken place successfully. I know that the Chairperson's Liaison Group is meeting next week and I would encourage committees to make use of the facilities available to them as such a step would have a significant impact on the number of staff required to be in the building.

I would ask every Member not to attend Parliament Buildings unless required for specific plenary or committee proceedings. For my own part, I intend to be in Parliament Buildings only on days when I will be chairing proceedings in the Chamber and my office will work remotely the remainder of the time.

The Assembly Commission is meeting next week and will consider whether any further measures are required in Parliament Buildings beyond those which are already in place, for example the wearing of face coverings in particular parts of the building. Parliament Buildings remains closed to the Public and the Assembly Commission will review that decision at the end of February.

I would appreciate the continued cooperation of Members to regularly wash their hands, wipe down surfaces and observe social distancing. This is important in all parts of the building but particularly when moving around the Assembly Chamber and in the division lobbies. I would encourage as many Members as possible to use the proxy voting provisions which have been put in place to keep the numbers in the voting lobbies to an absolute minimum.

Updates to building users will continue to be issued from the Commission's COVID-19 Response Group and these should be given particular attention.

I know that there are many different views amongst Members on how the Assembly should work, even in normal times. However, these are not normal times. The cooperation of all parties, which has been evident this week, to be constructive, realistic and flexible will make it much easier for Assembly officials and I to manage Assembly business in these difficult circumstances. Supporting the public health message and considering the welfare of all Members and staff should be our priorities at this time.

I hope this overview is helpful and I will of course provide you further updates as these matters progress.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Alex Maskey". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

ALEX MASKEY MLA