

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY
BUSINESS COMMITTEE

TUESDAY 1 DECEMBER 2020
IN THE SENATE CHAMBER, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

MINUTES

The meeting began at 1.02pm. (C) denotes attendance via conference call

Present:

The Speaker (Chairperson)
Ms K Armstrong
Ms C Bailey
Mr K Buchanan
Mr R Butler
Ms S Ennis
Mrs D Kelly
Mr C McGrath
Mr G Middleton
Mr A Muir
Mr J O'Dowd

In attendance:

Dr A McGarel	Clerk of Business
Mr P Gill	Clerk Assistant
Ms L Hogg	Clerk/Chief Executive
Dr G McGrath	Director of Parliamentary Services
Ms A McKelvey	Legal Advisor
Mr R Ramsey	Adviser to the Speaker
Ms F Leneghan	PS to the Speaker
Ms P Devlin	Assistant Assembly Clerk
Mr M O'Hare	Clerical Supervisor

Observers:

Ms C Kerr **Executive Office**

1 **Apologies**

1.1 Apologies were received from John Stewart and junior Minister Lyons.

2 **Minutes of previous meetings**

2.1 The minutes of the meeting on 24 November were **agreed**.

3 **Matters Arising**

- 3.1 Members **noted** that they had agreed to look at restricting speaking times for items of legislation and that the Speaker would bring a research paper to the Committee shortly looking at practices in other legislatures.
- 3.2 Members **noted** that the Speaker also wanted the Committee to consider other measures that can be used to manage plenary sitting times with a view to establishing a holistic and flexible approach that would not diminish the scrutiny role of the Assembly.
- 3.3 Members **noted** that the Speaker had asked officials to prepare a paper looking at a range of options available to him and the Committee to manage the timings of plenary sittings.
- 3.4 Members **agreed** to this approach.
- 3.5 A Member sought an update on the Committee's request for the Executive's legislative timetable up to Christmas. Members **noted** that despite the Speaker having written to the Executive on several occasions, no timetable had yet been received.
- 3.6 There were no other matters arising.

4 **Finalisation of the Order Papers for the Plenary Meetings in Week Commencing 7 December 2020**

Monday 7 December

- 4.1 Members **noted** that since the previous week, the Executive had added a statement from the Minister for Infrastructure on NSMC Waterways.
- 4.2 Members **noted** that this statement, and the statement scheduled last week for the Minister of Justice on Inter-Governmental Agreement on Criminal Justice Co-operation, had yet to be confirmed to the Speaker but would be added to indicative timings once confirmed.
- 4.3 Members **noted** that otherwise business remained as agreed at last week's meeting.

Private Members' Business

- 4.4 Members **noted** that Mr. Allister was seeking to schedule Further Consideration Stage of his Functioning of Government Bill, which would, by convention, be untimed.

- 4.5 Following discussion and input from Mr Allister's Business Committee representative, Members **agreed** that confirmed and anticipated business did not allow for sufficient time for the Bill Stage to be scheduled.
- 4.6 Members **agreed** the Order Paper for Monday 7 December.

Tuesday 8 December

Executive Committee Business

- 4.7 Members **noted** the addition of the following five items of Executive business:

Executive Business

- i. The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings) (Amendment No. 4) Regulations (NI) 2020.
 - ii. The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 13) Regulations (NI) 2020
 - iii. The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 14) Regulations (NI) 2020
 - iv. The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 15) Regulations (NI) 2020
 - v. The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 2) (Amendment No. 16) Regulations (NI) 2020
- 4.8 Members **noted** that the motions would be moved by the Minister of Justice on behalf of the Minister of Health.
- 4.9 Members **agreed** to schedule a single untimed debate for all five motions.
- 4.10 Members **noted** that there had otherwise been no changes to the Executive and Committee Business agreed at the last meeting.

Private Members' Business

- 4.11 Members **noted** that Mr. Allister had indicated that if Further Consideration Stage of his Bill had not already been scheduled, he would like the Committee to consider adding it to the Order Paper for this sitting.
- 4.12 Members **agreed** that insufficient time was available on that day for the Bill Stage to be scheduled.

4.13 Members **agreed** not to schedule an adjournment debate.

4.14 Members **agreed** the Order Paper for Tuesday 8 December.

5 Provisional Arrangements for the Plenary Meetings in Week Commencing 7 December 2020

Monday 14 December

Executive Committee Business

5.1 Members **noted** that Question Time was scheduled for the Executive Office (First Minister) and the Minister of Finance.

5.2 Members **noted** that the Executive had scheduled three Ministerial Statements, as follows:

- Two Statements from the Minister of Finance on the Budget and Dormant Account Funds.
- A Statement from the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on the NSMC Agricultural Sector meeting.

5.3 Members **agreed** that the statements should be added to timings once confirmed.

5.4 Members **noted** that the Executive had scheduled a further four items of business, as follows:

- The draft Alien and Locally Absent Species (Aquaculture) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (NI) 2020 for the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.
- The Maximum Number of Judges Order (NI) 2020 for the Minister of Justice.
- The Draft Carriage of Explosives (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations (NI) 2020 for the Minister of Justice.
- Consideration Stage of the Harbours (Grants and Loans Limit) Bill.

5.5 Members **agreed** to schedule untimed debates for the Regulations and for Consideration Stage of the Bill.

5.6 The TEO Official advised that there was no further Executive Business expected at that time.

Committee Business

- 5.7 Members **noted** that the Committee for the Executive Office had requested a debate on its report on the evidence received from local councils on the impact of the UK's exit from the EU, and that it had requested one and a half hours for the debate.
- 5.8 Members **agreed** that, given the amount of business already scheduled or anticipated for that day, the motion would be scheduled for Tuesday 15 December.

Private Members' Business

- 5.9 Members again **noted** a request from Mr. Allister to schedule Further Consideration Stage of his Bill if they had not already done so.
- 5.10 Members **agreed** that insufficient time was available on that day for the Bill Stage to be scheduled.
- 5.11 Members **agreed** the Provisional Order Paper for Monday 14 December.

Tuesday 15 December

Executive Committee Business

- 5.12 Members **noted** that Question Time would be scheduled for the Health and Infrastructure Ministers.
- 5.13 Members **noted** that the Executive had scheduled two items of business for this date:
- A Statement from the Minister for the Economy on NSMC Trade and Business Development.
 - Final Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill.
- 5.14 Members **agreed** to schedule an untimed debate for Final Stage of the Bill, and to add the statement once confirmed.
- 5.15 The TEO Official advised that there was no further Executive Business expected at that time.

Committee Business

- 5.16 Members **agreed** to schedule a motion for the Committee for the Executive Office as previously discussed, with 1.5 hours for the debate which would

include 10 minutes for moving and winding, 15 minutes for a Ministerial response and 5 minutes for all other speakers.

Private Members' Business

- 5.17 Members again **noted** a request from Mr. Allister to schedule Further Consideration Stage of his Bill if they had not already done so.
- 5.18 Members **agreed** that insufficient time was available on that day for the Bill Stage to be scheduled.
- 5.19 Members **agreed** to consider Provisional Order Papers for the first plenary week in January at next week's meeting, with a view to scheduling Further Consideration Stage of Mr Allister's Bill for the Tuesday sitting, subject to Executive Business.
- 5.20 Members **agreed** to defer taking a decision on an adjournment debate until the next meeting.
- 5.21 Members **agreed** the Provisional Order Paper for Tuesday 15 December.

6 Draft Question Time Rota January – Easter 2021

- 6.1 Members **noted** that Standing Order 20(4) requires the Business Committee to determine which Minister should answer oral questions in the Chamber on a particular day.
- 6.2 Members **noted** that an advice paper had been provided which outlined two alternative approaches to the Question Time rota for the period January to Easter 2021.
- 6.3 Members **noted** that the current process remained unchanged since the reduction in the number of government departments, and that this had resulted in Ministers coming up so frequently that Members successful in a ballot are being asked to submit questions to a Minister before that Minister has answered the previous oral questions.
- 6.4 Members **noted** that an option to address this was to reduce the number of question time slots to three Ministers each week, with the First and deputy First Minister continuing to attend every second week.
- 6.5 Following discussion, Members **agreed** to schedule two Question Time slots on a Monday and one on a Tuesday for a trial period commencing in January 2021 until Easter 2021, and to review the effectiveness of the new approach at the end of that period.

6.6 Members **agreed** that the single slot on Tuesdays would commence at 2pm and last for 45 minutes, following which other scheduled business could continue.

7 **Any Other Business**

7.1 Members discussed recent sittings that had continued until early the next morning. Members **noted** that there were possible implications under health and safety legislation for Members and staff who, following a late sitting, then had to travel some distance home. Members **noted** that it was permissible to use travel costs allowance for accommodation if needed.

7.2 Members **noted** that as the Speaker was undertaking work to address the need for late sittings this provision may not be required so much in future.

8 **Date and time of next meeting**

8.1 Members **agreed** that the next meeting would take place at 1pm on Tuesday 8 December in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The Speaker brought the meeting to a close at 1.31pm

The Speaker
Chairperson