

**NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**  
**BUSINESS COMMITTEE**

**WEDNESDAY 10 NOVEMBER 2021**  
**ASSEMBLY CHAMBER, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS**

**MINUTES**

*The meeting began at 1.05pm.*

**Present:**

**The Speaker (Chairperson)**  
**Ms C Bailey**  
**Mr P Bradshaw**  
**Ms J Bunting**  
**Mr R Butler**  
**Mr T Clarke**  
**Mrs D Kelly**  
**Mr A Muir**  
**Mr J O'Dowd**

**In attendance:**

<b>Dr A McGarel</b>	<b>Clerk of Business</b>
<b>Mr P Gill</b>	<b>Clerk Assistant</b>
<b>Dr K Pelan</b>	<b>Clerk Assistant</b>
<b>Ms L Hogg</b>	<b>Clerk/Chief Executive</b>
<b>Mr R Ramsey</b>	<b>Adviser to the Speaker</b>
<b>Ms F Leneghan</b>	<b>PS to the Speaker</b>
<b>Ms S Mallon</b>	<b>Clerk of Bills</b>
<b>Ms P Devlin</b>	<b>Assistant Assembly Clerk</b>
<b>Mr M O'Hare</b>	<b>Clerical Supervisor</b>

**1 Apologies**

1.1 Apologies were received from Colin McGrath, Rosemary Barton and Sinéad Ennis.

**2 Consideration of Legislative Scheduling**

2.1 The Speaker opened the meeting by summarising the paper on legislative pressures that had been provided. He outlined his priorities for managing bills and stressed the importance of the Assembly's focus being on passing and advancing as much legislation as possible that had been properly scrutinised.

He also stressed that the actions outlined in the 10 recommendations would only apply for the remainder of this mandate.

- 2.2 There was broad support for the recommendations. The specific comments on some along with agreed actions are outlined below.
- 2.3 **Recommendation 1:** That the Business Committee notes that for scheduling pressures, legislation will be considered in the priority of Executive Bills before PMBs and priority will be given to those PMBs which are further advanced in the legislative process.
- 2.4 **Recommendation 2:** That the Business Committee notes that while Members may continue to submit Bills, prioritising those Bills which are further advanced and are more likely to complete their passage, may in the latter weeks of the mandate require the Business Committee to delay requests for Second Stage debates.
- 2.5 **Recommendation 3:** Until the end of January, the Business Committee should consider facilitating later sittings when the pressure of business warrants it.
  - 2.5.1 The Speaker explained that currently the bulk of primary legislation sat with Committees and that if the Business Committee scheduled additional sittings before the end of January these would be likely to have a detrimental impact on the ability of Committees to conclude their bill scrutiny.
  - 2.5.2 The Speaker also noted that the Business Committee had rightly emphasised the importance of family friendly hours when scheduling plenary time to date but some later evenings would probably be necessary between now and the end of January in order to maximise the volume of legislation passing through plenary.
  - 2.5.3 The Alliance party expressed concern about very late sittings, citing staff welfare and road safety for those who had to travel some distance home and noting that there was no provision within the Determination for accommodation following a late sitting.
  - 2.5.4 The SDLP noted that there was a meeting of the Assembly Commission the following week at which the accommodation issue could be considered.
- 2.6 **Recommendation 4:** The Business Committee will review the legislative pressures again at the end of January, including on committees, and consider whether Wednesday sittings are required.
  - 2.6.1 The Speaker indicated that by the end of January, as bills completed Committee Stage, the focus would shift from Committees to plenary and that some additional sittings may be necessary. However, he acknowledged that Committees may remain under pressure with business other than primary legislation at that time.

- 2.6.2 The DUP noted concern about the potential impact on Committees as a result of extra sittings.
- 2.6.3 The representative of the smaller parties and independent Members sought clarity that additional sittings could be scheduled for any day as well as Wednesdays which was confirmed.
- 2.6.4 The UUP suggested that if there is to be an additional sitting, the Business Committee should take note of the Committees scheduled for that day and take that into consideration when deciding what is scheduled for plenary. Sinn Fein agreed, but noted that Committees could also be flexible in their meeting days to avoid the same members wanting to attend both.
- 2.7 **Recommendation 5:** When the Business Committee expects a late sitting, the lunchtime suspension will be reduced to 30 minutes with a further 30-minute suspension being held in the evening.
- 2.7.1 The SDLP supported two shorter suspensions when late sittings were anticipated and suggested that, where possible, sittings should also start earlier.
- 2.7.2 The Speaker was happy for parties to reflect on whether they were open to starting sittings earlier than 12pm on a Monday but noted that parties have previously been protective of Monday mornings for party group meetings.
- 2.8 **Recommendation 6:** Rather than taking a blanket approach to consideration stages, the Business Committee should continue to consider the nature, length and level of interest in each Bill when considering the scheduling of its stages in combination with other legislative debates.
- 2.8.1 The UUP noted that the size and detail of bills differed significantly and agreed that each should be considered on a case-by-case basis.
- 2.8.2 The DUP suggested that when a bill is short or uncontroversial its bill stages should not be allocated an inordinate amount of time and time saved should be allocated to additional items of business. In response the Speaker warned against the Business Committee allocating plenary time on the basis of the subject matter of bills.
- 2.9 **Recommendation 7:** The Business Committee notes that the scheduling of Private Members' Motions and Adjournment Debates is likely to be exceptional towards the end of the mandate.
- 2.10 **Recommendation 8:** Members' Statements will continue to be scheduled to retain some ability for Members to raise other political issues.
- 2.11 **Recommendation 9:** The Business Committee may wish to return to the issue of time limits on legislative debates in the context of the end of the mandate and consider the two options provided.
- 2.11.1 The Speaker noted that the Business Committee would not be able to reshape the process entirely at this late stage in the mandate, but should

seek to maximise what can be done in the time left to leave what legislation is left at an advanced stage so that it can be taken forward promptly in the new mandate.

- 2.11.2 The UUP expressed support for imposing time limits on the second stage debate for bills.
- 2.11.3 The DUP stated support for the current process for scrutinising bills, including unlimited debate times and sought confirmation that decisions made by this Committee would not be binding on the next Assembly.
- 2.11.4 The Speaker confirmed that decisions made to assist the passage of legislation at this stage would only be to the end of the mandate and that the Business Committee in the new Assembly would consider its own scheduling arrangements.
- 2.11.5 The Speaker advised that any bills that had not completed their final stage by the end of this mandate would fall. Each bill would still have to be re-introduced and go through the full legislation process in the next mandate thereby giving full control to the next Assembly. However, as any such bills would have already been drafted, they could be brought back quickly in the new Assembly.
- 2.11.6 Sinn Féin expressed support for time limits on legislation debates at all stages, but accepted that others held alternative views and agreed that imposing time limits on second stages was a good first step.
- 2.11.7 The Alliance party was supportive of time limits noting that other legislatures already do this.
- 2.11.8 The representative of the smaller parties and independent Members suggested that there was a role for whips in managing which speakers contribute and how many.

**Agreed: Time limits should be introduced on individual contributions for second stage debates on bills not proceeding via accelerated passage. The time limits to be agreed in the context of each individual bill.**

- 2.12 **Recommendation 10:** That the Business Committee notes the timing issues associated with any attempt to introduce electronic voting before the end of the mandate and considers whether there is any agreement to communicate to the Committee on Procedures the Business Committee's support to explore the potential of progress on electronic voting further.
  - 2.12.1 The UUP queried whether the proposal for electronic voting was just for scoping at present, as he did not believe it was something that could be delivered in this mandate.
  - 2.12.2 Sinn Féin expressed concern that current procedures for proxy voting took so long and asked if they could be reviewed.

2.12.3 The DUP noted that the process of voting in person in the Assembly is important and a privilege and should be respected. However, even with speedy voting the current proxy voting process takes a long time, and options for reducing the time taken should be considered.

2.12.4 The SDLP expressed support for electronic voting and endorsed the suggestion that current voting arrangements are reviewed with a view to speeding them up.

2.12.5 The Alliance party supported the introduction of electronic voting.

**Agreed: That consideration of the current processes for voting should be undertaken with a view to shortening the process.**

**Agreed: That officials explore options for the introduction of electronic voting, in particular the feasibility of doing so in the current mandate.**

2.13 Members **agreed** to consider the draft response to the Committee on Procedures' Inquiry into Private Members' Bills at its next meeting on Tuesday 16 November.

### 3 **Date and time of next meeting**

3.1 Members **agreed** that the next meeting would take place on Tuesday 16 November in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

*The Speaker brought the meeting to a close at 1.52pm*

**The Speaker  
Chairperson**