

## **Guidance for Members on the Procedures of the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID 19 Response**

### **Purpose**

- The Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID 19 Response (the Committee) provides the Assembly with the ability to receive statements from Ministers on days when the Assembly is not sitting.
- The Committee can only receive statements from Ministers on matters relating to the COVID-19 response.
- The Committee can conduct no other business than to receive these statements and to question Ministers on them.

### **Advance planning**

- The Executive has been advised that as much advance notice as possible should be given if a Minister is likely to wish to make a statement to the Ad Hoc Committee in order that arrangements can be made for the Committee to sit.
- The Executive has therefore been asked to provide a provisional schedule each week of any Ministers who wished to make statements to the Ad Hoc Committee that week.
- The Chairperson will consider the information provided by the Executive and determine on which days that week the Ad Hoc Committee shall meet, which Ministers shall make statements and at what time. This information will then be shared with members at the start of the week.
- The Chairperson may agree to schedule additional statements or even additional meetings of the committee (over and above those notified in the provisional schedule) to take account of Ministers needing to update the Assembly on recent or unforeseen developments.

### **Giving Notice to Make a Statement to the Ad Hoc Committee**

- The usual time for meeting will be in the afternoon.

- A notice to make a statement should be received as early as possible but no later than 24 hours before the statement is due to be made in order for the Chairperson to make arrangements for the Committee to meet and to give notice to Members.
- In emergency circumstances, and usually with at least 24 hours' notice, the Chairperson may agree either to remove a statement from the agenda of a committee meeting or to cancel a meeting of the committee.
- The Chairperson will also communicate notice of a meeting to the public.
- Ministers may request to make statements to the Ad Hoc Committee on more than one non-sitting day each week.
- There may be more than one statement made at each committee meeting.
- Ministers may request to make joint statements.

### **Requirements in Advance of the Meeting**

- Ministers will be expected to make electronic copies of their statements available to the Chairperson (via the Speaker's office) in advance of the committee meeting.
- The statement will need to be emailed to the Speaker's Office, as soon as it is available, and no later than one hour in advance of the committee meeting beginning.
- The statement will then be provided to all members by the Chairperson in advance of the committee meeting beginning.

### **Format**

- The meeting will take place in the Assembly Chamber.
- The statement will be made from a podium in front of the Speaker's table.
- The committee meeting will be broadcast in the same way as plenary sittings are broadcast.
- The meeting will begin with the Chairperson drawing Members' attention to the agreed minutes of the previous meeting.
- Following this, the Chairperson will invite the Minister to make a statement to the Committee.

## **Questions to the Statement**

- Following the statement there will be a period for members to ask the Minister questions on the statement.
- Usually this period will be an hour.
- However, if in advance of the meeting the Minister requested an alternative period of the time and with a satisfactory rationale, the Chairperson may decide to allow for that alternative period of time.
- If the Chair thinks that not all Members may be accommodated within an hour, he may decide upon an extended time period.
- In any case, before the Minister makes the statement the Chairperson will announce the period of time available for questions.
- It will be for the Chairperson to determine the order in which members are called to ask a question and how they should indicate that they wish to be called.
- The Chairperson may decide to allow (a) supplementary questions or (b) additional questions if there is remaining time after all members had asked their initial questions.

## **Attendance by Officials**

- A Minister making a solo statement can be accompanied by no more than one key official to participate in the proceedings.
- In such cases, only the Minister will make the statement.
- However, a Minister accompanied by a key official may ask that official to answer any question.

## **Differences from a Plenary Sitting**

- As a committee meeting, the Standing Orders in relation to plenary business do not apply.
- No other business other than that on the agenda can be considered.
- There will be no Order Paper and no Prayers.

## **Impact on Normal Assembly Procedures**

- Ministers will continue to make oral statements to the Assembly at its scheduled plenary sittings, in line with the provisions of Standing Order 18A.
- Nothing in these arrangements would prevent a Minister from making a written Ministerial statement under Standing Order 18B where that Minister considered it appropriate to make a written statement.

### **Privilege**

- Under Section 50 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, for the purposes of the law of defamation, absolute privilege applies equally to:
  - the making of a statement in proceedings of the Assembly; and
  - the publication of a statement under the Assembly's authority.
- The term 'proceedings of the Assembly' includes the work of committees and therefore includes the Ad Hoc Committee on the COVID-19 response.

### **Remote participation**

- As all Members of the Assembly are Members of the Committee, there is no provision for members or Ministers to participate remotely in proceedings of the Ad Hoc Committee.
- Parties are expected to manage attendance at the Committee to enable social distancing in line with the seating arrangements agreed for the Chamber.

### **Further guidance**

- Should members require any further guidance, they should email the Speaker's Office ([speakersoffice@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:speakersoffice@niassembly.gov.uk)).