

## An Ceann Comhairle

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**Northern Ireland  
Assembly**

## The Speaker

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**To: All Assembly Members**

**18 March 2020**

Dear Member,

### **Urgent - Assembly Business and Covid 19**

At the start of plenary business on Monday, I reflected that business as usual could not continue at the Assembly during the current period. I have had further conversations with the party whips today and I am heartened by the clear common purpose between them.

They have agreed that the work of the Assembly in the time ahead should be focused on the public health crisis and guided by two principles. Firstly, non-essential Assembly business will be avoided in order that it does not distract from the delivery of public services to deal with the impact of Covid 19. The significant resources that are dedicated in departments to Assembly business and answering questions cannot be ignored. For example, in the past two months since the Assembly returned, approximately 800 questions have been tabled to the Minister of Health.

Secondly, the priority of Assembly business will be on ensuring that Executive business can be considered and that the ability for Ministers to provide updates and be scrutinised on these issues continues, in a publicly transparent way, in the Assembly Chamber.

As a result, there will be some initial changes. Parties have agreed that the Private Members Motions scheduled for next week will not now be debated and all such motions will be postponed for the time to come. A motion will also be tabled next week so that the normal routine of Oral Questions for Ministers is suspended until 13 May.

In addition, I am asking all Members to refrain from tabling Written Questions in the usual manner. Instead, I am encouraging Ministers to come forward to the Assembly regularly to make statements which can provide more focused opportunities for scrutiny on the issues which are currently to the core of the public interest.

The Assembly Business Committee will give further consideration to future business next week, including having only one plenary sitting each week, and also ways in which how the Assembly operates might change to accommodate social distancing.

Furthermore, other temporary changes to Standing Orders to take account of the extreme nature of the situation will also be considered. These measures will provide a helpful framework for the Assembly Commission to take decisions in relation to protecting the welfare of Assembly staff and all building users.

I am conscious that it is highly unusual for any Speaker to seek to reduce the ability of elected representatives to scrutinise Ministers but these are extraordinary times and they require extraordinary measures. In this regard, I am grateful for the co-operation that I have had from the political parties and their commitment to supporting public services during these difficult times.

In these circumstances, I know that you will understand that the formalities of parliamentary procedure must give way to providing leadership and protecting the health and well-being of our community.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Alex Maskey". The signature is written in black ink and includes a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

**ALEX MASKEY MLA**