

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY
BUSINESS COMMITTEE

TUESDAY 24 MARCH 2020
IN LONG GALLERY, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

MINUTES

The meeting began at 1.04pm.

Present:

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

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
Mr R Ramsey	Adviser to the Speaker
Mr P Stitt	PS to the Speaker
Ms P Devlin	Assistant Assembly Clerk
Mr M O'Hare	Clerical Supervisor

Observers:

Mr D Kearney	Junior Minister
Mr N Jackson	Executive Office

1 Apologies

- 1.1 Apologies were received from Kellie Armstrong and Gary Middleton. Members **noted** that John Blair had been nominated by Kellie Armstrong to attend in her place.

2 Minutes of previous meetings

- 2.1 The minutes of the meeting on 16 March 2020 were **agreed**.

3 **Matters Arising**

- 3.1 Members **noted** that in response to the current public health situation, the formation of an Ad Hoc Committee was being considered. Members were reminded that these proposals had previously been discussed with them and a paper had been issued which was also provided in their packs.
- 3.2 Members **noted** that they had been provided with a draft motion to establish the Ad Hoc Committee to consider the response to COVID-19, and **agreed** that the motion should be scheduled on Tuesday 31 March.
- 3.3 Members **agreed** that the motion would be treated as a Business Motion and there would be no debate or amendment, as per convention.
- 3.4 Members **noted** that a Committee member would be required to move the motion in plenary.
- 3.5 Members **noted** that the Speaker had discussions with his counterparts in other legislatures and found that as with the Assembly, they were scaling back non-essential business to deal primarily with matters pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- 3.6 There were no further matters arising.

4 **Finalisation of the Order Papers for plenary meetings on week commencing 30 March 2020**

- 4.1 Members **noted** that at the informal whips meeting the previous week, it had been suggested that plenary sittings are kept to the minimum required to conduct essential business only.
- 4.2 Members **noted** the content of the Notification of Forthcoming Business from the Executive Office.
- 4.3 Members **agreed** that, in light of the amount of business requested by the Executive and the rapidly developing public health crisis, there needed to be only one plenary sitting and it would be on Tuesday 31 March.

Tuesday 31 March

Assembly Business

- 4.4 Members **noted** that a motion was scheduled for Andrew Muir to replace Trevor Lunn on the Public Accounts Committee.
- 4.5 Members **noted** that a motion had been tabled to appoint new Trustees of the Assembly Members' Pension Scheme.
- 4.6 Members discussed whether the appointment of Trustees was essential given the current situation, but were advised that there was currently no quorum to take decisions on the Scheme. Members **agreed** to schedule the motion.

Executive Committee Business

- 4.7 Members **noted** that a legislative consent motion for Westminster's Agriculture Bill has been scheduled, and that due to time constraints, had to proceed.
- 4.8 Members **noted** that the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has indicated he will deliver a statement on Green Growth. Members queried whether this statement was a priority but acknowledged that Ministers are permitted to make statements as they consider necessary.
- 4.9 Members **noted** that the Minister of Finance has also indicated that he will deliver a statement on the Budget.
- 4.10 Junior Minister Kearney advised Members that there was an Executive meeting forthcoming and that he would bring the Business Committee's concerns about Executive priorities to that meeting.

Committee Business

- 4.11 Members **noted** that the Committee on Procedures had scheduled a meeting to discuss emergency Standing Orders relating to COVID-19 arrangements.
- 4.12 Members **agreed** that the Committee on Procedures' business would be added to the Order Paper after its meeting.

Private Members' Business

- 4.13 Members **noted** that Private Members' and adjournment selections had been removed by party whips due to the rapid escalation of the COVID-19 situation.

Members **noted** that rotas were provided in their packs which indicated that previously scheduled business had been postponed.

- 4.14 Members **agreed** the draft Order Paper for Tuesday 31 March 2020, subject to the addition of the Committee on Procedures' business.

5 **Provisional arrangements for plenary meetings on week commencing 20 April**

- 5.1 Members **noted** that there were no requests for Executive or Committee business on either Monday 20 or Tuesday 21 April at this stage.
- 5.2 Members **agreed** that a Provisional Order Paper would issue for Tuesday 21 April, and this would be reviewed at the next meeting.

6 **Any Other Business**

- 6.1 Members **noted** that they had been provided with the research paper on the timings of debates on legislation in other legislatures.
- 6.2 Members **agreed** to defer an oral briefing on the research paper on timings of debates in other legislatures until a future date, given the current circumstances.
- 6.3 Members **noted** a revised seating plan of the Chamber which reflects the requirement for social distancing.
- 6.4 Members **noted** that the proposals allowed for no more than one third of Members of the larger parties in the Chamber at any one time, and that group of smaller parties and independents should have no more than 2 Members in the Chamber.
- 6.5 Members **noted** that the Speaker would be announcing that afternoon that he is relaxing the requirement to be present in the chamber for the duration of a ministerial statement in order to be allowed to ask a question.
- 6.6 Members **noted** that they had been provided with a paper on proposals to reduce the number of Members required to pass through the lobbies during a division and to be present in Committees during a vote. The Clerk Assistant spoke to this paper.
- 6.7 Members were content with the proposals in the paper.

7 **Date and time of next meeting**

- 7.1 Members **agreed** that the next meeting would take place at 1pm on Tuesday 31 March in the Long Gallery.

The Chairperson brought the meeting to a close at 1.39pm

The Speaker
Chairperson