

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY
BUSINESS COMMITTEE

TUESDAY 28 APRIL 2020
IN THE SENATE CHAMBER, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

MINUTES

The meeting began at 1.10pm. (C) denotes attendance via conference call

Present:

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

In attendance:	Dr A McGarel Mr P Gill Ms L Hogg Dr G McGrath Mr J McMillen Mr R Ramsey Ms P Devlin Mr M O'Hare	Clerk of Business Clerk Assistant Clerk/Chief Executive Director of Parliamentary Services Head of Legal Services (C) Adviser to the Speaker Assistant Assembly Clerk Clerical Supervisor
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Observers:	Mr D Kearney Mr N Jackson	Junior Minister Executive Office
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1 Apologies

1.1 Apologies were received from John Stewart and Colin McGrath.

2 Minutes of previous meetings

2.1 The minutes of the meeting on 21 April 2020 were **agreed**.

3 **Matters Arising**

- 3.1 There were no matters arising.

4 **Review of Arrangements for Written and Oral Questions**

- 4.1 Members **noted** that there had been discussion around Members' concerns regarding the quality and timeliness of responses to both questions asked of Ministers in the Ad Hoc Committee on COVID-19 response, and when asked directly of departments, at the last meeting.
- 4.2 Members **noted** that they had agreed to discuss the suspension of written and oral questions at this meeting, and had been provided with an options paper to assist in their consideration.
- 4.3 Dr. McGarel provided Members with a brief summary of the content of the options paper.
- 4.4 Members **noted** that the Speaker had written to the First and deputy First Minister after last week's meeting, and that they had been provided with a copy of the Speaker's correspondence and the response received from the First and deputy First Ministers.
- 4.5 The Speaker discussed his views with Members. He concluded by outlining his position which was that the suspension of oral questions should continue so that Executive ministers and their officials were not diverted from responding to the current health crisis but that the current arrangement for written questions could be relaxed to some extent.
- 4.6 Following discussions, Members **agreed** to extend the suspension of oral questions to Ministers for a further four weeks and to schedule a motion on the Order Paper for 5 May 2020 to this effect.
- 4.7 Members **agreed** that the voluntary agreement amongst the main parties to cease written questions to Executive ministers would be adjusted to allow Members to table two written questions per week, none of which should be for priority answer.
- 4.8 Members **agreed** that party whips should endeavor to manage questions tabled by their Members to ensure they did not disproportionately impact on any department.

- 4.9 Members **agreed** to monitor the arrangement at each regular meeting and requested details of the written questions tabled each week, and the answers being provided to Members, to be provided by the Business Office.
- 4.10 Members **noted** that the Speaker would consider how some of the issues raised could be addressed, and that he would provide an update at the next meeting.

5 **Finalisation of the Order Papers for plenary meetings on week commencing 4 May 2020**

- 5.1 Members **noted** that they previously agreed that plenary sittings should be kept to the minimum required to conduct essential business.
- 5.2 Members **noted** that, based on the business requested by the Executive, one sitting had been scheduled for Tuesday 5 May.

Assembly Business

- 5.3 Members **agreed** to schedule a motion to enact their agreement to extend the suspension of question time, and **agreed** the wording of that motion.
- 5.4 Members **noted** that as this matter relates to the business of the Assembly, it would normally be decided without amendment or debate in accordance with Standing Order 12(7).
- 5.5 Members **noted** that a similar motion scheduled on 23 March prompted a point of order about the lack of opportunity for debate.
- 5.6 Members **agreed** that the motion should again be treated as a business motion with no debate.

Executive Committee Business

- 5.7 Members **noted** that they had previously agreed to schedule two items of Executive business for 5 May, the Census Order (NI) 2020 and a debate and vote on Budget 2020-21.
- 5.8 Members **noted** that the Business Office was seeking clarification on the wording of the motion provided by the Department of Finance and it may require adjustment before the Order Paper issues, but Members would be informed of any changes.
- 5.9 Members **noted** that one further item of business had been requested by the Minister of Finance, who was seeking to schedule the Rates (Regional Rates) Order (Northern Ireland) 2020, a statutory rule subject to affirmative

resolution, which sets the amounts payable for regional domestic and non-domestic rates for the year ending 31 March 2021.

5.10 Members **noted** that this item would by convention be untimed.

5.11 TEO officials advised that no further business was anticipated at that time.

Committee Business

5.12 Members **noted** that one item of Committee Business had been requested from the Committee for Finance; a motion to extend the committee stage of the Functioning of Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

5.13 Members **agreed** to schedule the Committee motion with no time limits applied, in accordance with convention.

Private Members' Business

5.14 Members **agreed** that Private Members motions and adjournment debates would not be scheduled.

5.15 Members **agreed** the draft Order Paper for 5 May 2020 subject to the required changes to the Budget debate motion and the addition of a business motion to further suspend oral questions.

6 Provisional arrangements for plenary meetings on week commencing 11 May

6.1 Members **noted** that there was one provisional request for Executive Business for 12 May; the introduction of the Welfare Supplementary Payments (Loss of Universal Credit or Housing Benefit) Bill by the Minister for Communities.

6.2 Members **noted** that the introduction of this Bill was conditional upon its approval by the Executive and the Speaker's approval.

6.3 Members **noted** that by convention, first stages of bills are not included on the Order Paper but would be shown on the Indicative Timings once approved.

6.4 Members **agreed** to schedule one sitting on Tuesday 12 May and to provisionally schedule the introduction of the Welfare Supplementary Payments (Loss of Universal Credit or Housing Benefit) Bill.

6.5 Junior Ministers/TEO Officials advised that no other business was currently expected.

- 6.6 Members **agreed** to issue a Provisional Order Paper to indicate that there will be a sitting on Tuesday 12 May even though the only proposed item of business would not appear on the Order Paper and could not yet be confirmed.

7 **Correspondence**

- 7.1 Members **noted** correspondence from the Clerk to the Committee for the Executive Office and associated document setting out matters referenced in New Decade, New Approach which fall within the remit of the Executive.

8 **Any Other Business**

- 8.1 Members discussed the sound quality at the meeting and **agreed** that Business Office staff would continue to liaise with relevant officials to explore possible solutions.

9 **Date and time of next meeting**

- 9.1 Members **agreed** that the next meeting would take place at 1pm on Tuesday 5 May.

The Chairperson brought the meeting to a close at 1.53pm

Mr Keith Buchanan
Acting Chairperson