

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY
BUSINESS COMMITTEE

TUESDAY 19 MAY 2020
IN THE SENATE CHAMBER, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

MINUTES

The meeting began at 5.20pm. (C) denotes attendance via conference call

Present:

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

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
	Ms P Devlin	Assistant Assembly Clerk
	Mr M O'Hare	Clerical Supervisor

1 Apologies

1.1 Apologies were received from John Stewart and Andrew Muir.

2 Consideration of Options for Resuming Assembly Business Following 'Lockdown'

2.1 Members **noted** that the technical problems experienced earlier had now been resolved.

2.2 Members **noted** that at recent meetings they had discussed giving consideration to how the Assembly should function coming out of 'lockdown'.

- 2.3 Members **noted** that the Speaker's discussion paper on the management of Assembly business as lockdown restrictions ease had been circulated to Members the previous evening and had been tabled today.
- 2.4 Members **noted** that the Speaker was attending the meeting remotely.
- 2.5 The Speaker was invited to brief the Committee on his paper.

Principles

- 2.6 Members **noted** that the management of Assembly business during this public health crisis had broadly been guided by three principles:
- To allow departments to focus on the COVID-19 response.
 - To ensure the Assembly could continue to conduct essential business including being updated and exercising its scrutiny role on COVID-19 issues.
 - To reduce the risk to Members and staff, including by minimising the number of people required in Parliament Buildings.
- 2.7 Members **agreed** that those principles should be revised to guide the Committee's approach to business scheduling as restrictions gradually ease.
- 2.8 Members **agreed** they were content with the following revised principles:
- To manage the resumption of full Assembly business taking account of the easements to restrictions in wider society as introduced through the Executive's recovery plan.
 - To ensure the Assembly can continue to conduct business including exercising its scrutiny role on COVID 19 and wider issues.
 - To reduce the risk to Members and staff including by taking account of the return to work measures set out in the Executive's recovery plan

Phased Approach to Resuming Assembly Business

- 2.9 Members **agreed** the following phased approach should commence immediately:

Stage 1

- 2.10 One sitting day per week, unless Executive business required a second sitting day. With immediate effect, Private Members' business could be scheduled on any sitting day where Executive Business is unlikely to take up all of the time available, but a second sitting day would not be scheduled solely to consider Private Members' business.

Stage 2

- 2.11 On 26 May Business Committee would review the resumption of Question Time. The voluntary limit on written questions would also be reviewed.
- 2.12 Members **noted** that a motion would have to be scheduled for week commencing 1 June if the suspension of Question Time were to be continued.

Stage 3

- 2.13 The resumption of two plenary sittings each week, regardless of the volume of Executive business.
- 2.14 Members **noted** that the timeframe for the commencement of Stage 3 would be determined and agreed by the Committee in the context of the wider situation.

Other measures

- 2.15 Members **agreed** that a paper on changing sitting days to Tuesday and Wednesday each week should be brought to the Committee for consideration in the next 2-3 weeks, with view to it being introduced in September if the proposal was agreed.
- 2.16 Members **agreed** to write to the Committee on Procedures to request that it consider retention of proxy voting for future use for absences such as maternity/ paternity leave or long term illness.

Private Members' Bills

- 2.17 Members **agreed** to feed back to the Members whom they represent that they should submit any proposals for Private Members' Bills to the Non-Executive Bills team as soon as possible.

Conclusion

- 2.18 Members **agreed** that the Speaker should write to the Executive to ensure it is aware of the initial approach that the Committee has agreed to adopt at this meeting and to seek its views on this approach.

3 Any Other Business

- 3.1 Members **noted** that some Committee members were of the view that Assembly business, both in plenary and in committees, should continue over the summer recess in order to progress legislation, and scrutinise and support

the Executive during the pandemic. Members **agreed** to include this in their deliberations when reviewing Stage 2 at next week's meeting.

- 3.2 Members **noted** an issue with the availability of catering services on sitting days under current arrangements and the need for this to be addressed if Members were going to be spending more time in Parliament Buildings.

4 **Date and time of next meeting**

- 4.1 Members **agreed** that the next meeting would take place on Tuesday 26 May in the Senate Chamber at 1pm.

The Acting Chairperson brought the meeting to a close at 5.40pm

John O'Dowd
Acting Chairperson