

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY
BUSINESS COMMITTEE

TUESDAY 26 MAY 2020
IN THE SENATE CHAMBER, PARLIAMENT BUILDINGS

MINUTES

The meeting began at 1.11pm. (C) denotes attendance via conference call

Present:

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

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

Observers:	Mr D Kearney	Junior Minister
	Mrs K Morrison	Executive Office

1 Apologies

1.1 Apologies were received from Clare Bailey. Rachel Woods attended the meeting on her behalf.

2 Minutes of previous meetings

2.1 The minutes of both meetings on 19 May 2020 were **agreed**.

3 **Matters Arising**

- 3.1 Members **noted** that the Speaker was considering the issue of summer recess which had been raised at the last meeting.
- 3.2 The Speaker gave a brief overview of his consideration of the matter, noting that there was a general presumption amongst all parties that summer recess would not be as originally planned.
- 3.3 Members **noted** the need to have more information on the Executive's programme of legislation over the coming months in order to ascertain what requirements for plenary sittings over recess might be and the Speaker indicated he was engaging with the Executive in relation to this.
- 3.4 Members **noted** that a paper from the Speaker would be circulated after the meeting and **agreed** to consider that paper and discuss the matter at a future meeting when the Executive's Legislative Programme had been provided.

4 **Review of Questions Tabled Since 19 May, and of Arrangements for Oral and Written Questions**

- 4.1 Members **noted** that information on written questions submitted to Ministers in the weekly period since 19 May had been provided in their packs.
- 4.2 Dr McGarel provided Members with a summary of the information.

Review of Written and Oral Questions

- 4.3 Members **noted** that they had decided to review the suspension of oral and topical questions, currently in effect until 10 June, as well as the voluntary agreement to limit the number of written questions being asked of departments.
- 4.4 Members **noted** that an options paper had been circulated the previous week to inform these discussions and was provided in their packs.
- 4.5 Dr McGarel provided Members with a summary of the options outlined within the paper.
- 4.6 Members **agreed** that the approach taken to reintroducing both written and oral questions should be incremental.

- 4.7 Members **agreed** that the voluntary limit on written questions to Ministers should be increased to five per week plus one priority question, effective immediately.
- 4.8 Members **noted** that resuming oral questions involves not only the Minister being available on the day, but also a large amount of preparatory work by officials.
- 4.9 Members **noted** that a further suspension necessitated adding a motion to next week's Order Paper.
- 4.10 Members gave consideration to a number of options including reducing the frequency of Ministers attending, the number of oral questions selected in the ballot, limiting the number of supplementary questions allowed and reinstating listed, but not topical, questions.
- 4.11 Members also discussed the possibility of returning to a normal two-day plenary schedule and discontinuing the Ad Hoc Committee on Covid-19 response.
- 4.12 Members **agreed** that a paper summarising the options discussed and how they might be implemented, should be provided by officials after the meeting.

5 **Finalisation of the Order Papers for Plenary Meetings on 1 & 2 June 2020**

Monday 1 June

- 5.1 Members **noted** that they had decided to adopt a phased approach to resuming full Assembly Business, which would commence this week with stage 1: one sitting day each week unless Executive Business requires a second and the scheduling of Private Members' Business on any sitting day where Executive Business is unlikely to take up all of the time available.
- 5.2 Members **noted** that based on the business requested by the Executive in its notice of forthcoming business for the Assembly last week, two sittings were scheduled for week commencing 1 June.

Assembly Business

- 5.3 Members **noted** that no Assembly Business had been requested.
- 5.4 Members **noted** that if a motion to further suspend oral questions was not included on the Order Paper, these would resume from w/c 15 June.

- 5.5 Members **noted** that if, following consideration of the paper referred to in 4.12, they opted to reinstate listed but not topical questions, a motion to suspend Standing Order 20A would be scheduled.

Executive Committee Business

- 5.6 Members **noted** that following items of business had been scheduled:

- Consideration Stage of the Budget No. 2 Bill
- A motion for the Housing (Amendment) Bill to proceed by accelerated passage.
- Second Stage of the Housing (Amendment) Bill
- Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 3) Regulations (NI) 2019;
- Child Support (Miscellaneous Amendments No. 4) Regulations (NI) 2019; and
- A Legislative Consent Motion on the Pensions Schemes Bill.

Private Members Business

- 5.7 Members **agreed** that there was sufficient time to schedule one item of Private Members Business, as follows:

- Planning a Just Economic Recovery after the COVID-19 Crisis (SF)

- 5.8 Members **noted** that as the selected motion called on the Executive to take action, it would be for the Executive to identify a Minister to respond to the debate.

- 5.9 Junior Minister Kearney indicated that all Ministers were available.

- 5.10 Members **agreed** the Order Paper for Monday 1 June.

Tuesday 2 June

Assembly Business

- 5.11 Members **noted** that no requests for Assembly Business had been received.

Executive Committee Business

- 5.12 Members **noted** that in addition to the items of Executive Business scheduled last week, the Executive Office had added the following items of business:

- The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020; and
- The Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Amendment No. 3) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020.

5.13 Members **agreed** to schedule one untimed debate for both Statutory Rules as they were inter-related.

5.14 Members **noted** that the following items of business remained scheduled:

- A Legislative Consent Motion on the Sentencing (Pre-Consolidation Amendments) Bill;
- A Legislative Consent Motion on the Corporate Insolvency and Governance Bill;
- Further Consideration Stage of the Budget No. 2 Bill; and
- Final Stage of the Budget No. 2 Bill.

Committee Business

5.15 Members **noted** that an untimed debate had been scheduled for the Committee for Justice to extend the Committee Stage of the Domestic Abuse and Family Proceedings Bill.

Private Members Business

5.16 Members **agreed** that there was sufficient time to schedule two items of Private Members Business, as follows:

- Extension of the EU Withdrawal Transition Period (SDLP)
- Abortion Legislation: Non-Fatal Disabilities (DUP)

5.17 Junior Minister Kearney indicated that all Ministers were available.

5.18 Members **agreed** the Order Paper for Tuesday 2 June.

6 Provisional Arrangements for the Plenary Meetings During Week Commencing 8 June 2020

6.1 Members **noted** that they have been provided with the Notice of Forthcoming Business from the Executive Office, and the listed items of Executive Business necessitated scheduling only one sitting for week commencing 8 June.

6.2 Members **agreed** to schedule one sitting on Tuesday 9 June.

Tuesday 9 June

Assembly Business

- 6.3 Members **noted** that no requests for Assembly Business had been received to date.

Executive Committee Business

- 6.4 Members **noted** that the Minister of Justice had scheduled a motion seeking the Assembly's approval for the NI Criminal Injuries Compensation (Amendment 2020) Scheme (2009).
- 6.5 Members **agreed** to schedule an untimed debate for the motion.
- 6.6 Members **noted** that the Minister of Justice had scheduled a Legislative Consent Motion on the Birmingham Commonwealth Games Bill.
- 6.7 Members **agreed** to schedule an untimed debate for the Legislative Consent Motion.
- 6.8 Junior Ministers/TEO Officials advised that no other business was currently expected.

Private Members Business

- 6.9 Members **agreed** to schedule two items of Private Members Business, and noted that the next selections were for Sinn Féin and the Ulster Unionist Party.
- 6.10 Members **agreed** that representatives of both parties could defer selection of their motions until the next meeting.
- 6.11 Members **agreed** the Provisional Order Paper for Tuesday 9 June 2020.

7 Correspondence

- 7.1 Members **noted** that the Speaker had written on behalf of the Committee to the Executive Office to express Members' dissatisfaction with the quality and timeliness of responses to written questions from departments.
- 7.2 Members **noted** the correspondence but remained concerned that a number of questions remain unanswered.

7.3 Members **agreed** that the assumption that Members have access to, and engage regularly with, Politics Plus, is inaccurate as it is not available on the website and is not reaching all MLAs.

7.4 Junior Ministers/TEO Officials **agreed** to take the Committee's comments back to the Executive.

8 **Any Other Business**

8.1 Members **noted** that Kellie Armstrong had emailed the Speaker to request that the Business Committee writes to the Executive Office to ask that departments send MLAs responses to written questions via email, rather than issue them in hard copy.

8.2 Ms Armstrong was invited to discuss her request with the Committee.

8.3 Members **noted** that answers to written questions are provided directly to individual Members by Ministers and are considered to be personal correspondence between them, and that ultimately it would be for individual Members to communicate with Ministers directly.

8.4 Members **agreed** that, although it was beyond the Business Committee's remit, they would issue a general letter to the Executive advising that during the current pandemic it may be more prudent for Ministers to communicate with Members solely via electronic means.

9 **Date and time of next meeting**

9.1 Members **agreed** that the next meeting would take place on Tuesday 2 June in the Senate Chamber.

The Acting Chairperson brought the meeting to a close at 2.02pm

Mr Keith Buchanan
Acting Chairperson