



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

## COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS AND PRIVILEGES

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### **Guidance to Assembly Members on All-Party Group meetings during the current public health crisis**

This guidance note is being issued by the Committee on Standards and Privileges in response to recent queries from external stakeholders in relation to whether/how All-Party Groups (APGs) can meet in the context of the current COVID-19 pandemic and the related government advice. In particular, queries have been raised regarding whether APGs can hold 'virtual meetings', with members attending (and external stakeholders being present where required) via video conferencing and other technologies.

#### **Meetings in Parliament Buildings**

Members will be aware that, on 16 March 2020, the Assembly Commission, took the decision to close Parliament Buildings to the public from Wednesday 18 March. No public tours, events or visitor activities will take place and members of the public will not be permitted access into Parliament Buildings, until further notice. Whilst the Assembly continues to meet to carry out its political and legislative responsibilities, only permanent Assembly passholders and those essential to the delivery of Assembly business will continue to have access to the building, as required.

Also in light of the current public health situation, all political parties have agreed that significant changes to the business of the Northern Ireland Assembly are required. In that regard, the following three principles are informing the Assembly's approach:

1. That 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 subject to Assembly scrutiny continues;
2. That non-essential Assembly business will be avoided in order not to distract from the delivery of public services to deal with the impact of Covid-19; and

3. That the welfare of Members and staff should be protected by only conducting essential business.

Whilst APGs are not formal Assembly groups and their business does not constitute proceedings of the Assembly, they may nonetheless wish to remain cognisant of the aforementioned approach and of the wider government advice on COVID-19. Moreover, there are clearly practical difficulties in relation to APG meetings in Parliament Buildings, including the restrictions on access to the Building and adherence to the requirements on social distancing.

In light of current circumstances, a number of APGs scheduled to meet in the coming weeks have cancelled their meetings. A number of statutory and standing committees have also made the decision to not meet formally over the coming weeks.

That said, how groups operate and conduct their meetings is generally a matter for each group, subject to them adhering to the Rules on APGs which are available here: [http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/publications/all-party-groups/apg\\_rules.pdf](http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/globalassets/documents/publications/all-party-groups/apg_rules.pdf). Therefore, it is ultimately a matter for each group to decide whether it is necessary to proceed with a meeting in the current circumstances.

Members should note that the Assembly has put in place practical changes to allow social distancing, both in Plenary and Committee rooms. If an APG decides to meet in Parliament Buildings (having taken account of the considerations outlined above) in the coming weeks, it will be expected to adhere to the most up to date guidance in that regard.

### **Meetings involving APG members attending remotely**

In terms of the use of technology to hold APG meetings remotely, whilst the rules do not make specific provision in this regard, the Committee is mindful of the need for flexibility in the current circumstances and considers that this is a constructive alternative. Therefore, this is also a matter for each group to decide on itself at this time.

Again, if a group decides to pursue this option it should continue to adhere to the Rules on APGs. For example, the following rules would continue to apply in this case:

- Paragraph 5.2: 'Any MLA may attend and speak at any meeting of an All-Party Group ... not just its registered members. In order to ensure that all MLAs are aware that a meeting of an All-Party Group is taking place details of the meeting should be published in advance...'. (The latter is done by way of an All Party Notice (APN) from the Business Office, issued at least 7 days in advance of the meeting. A tailored APN template is attached at **Appendix 1** for use when providing notice of a remote/virtual meeting of an APG.)
- Paragraph 5.4: 'Meetings of All-Party Groups must be attended by at least two members of the group'. (To facilitate APGs in holding remote/virtual meetings, the Committee is content, in the present circumstances, to interpret this rule

as meaning that it is not necessary to have the two members of the APG physically present for a meeting to take place.)

- Paragraph 6.4: ‘All-Party Groups must respect the limitations on the use of Assembly facilities...’ – under these provisions, while Members may make reasonable use of the Assembly’s IT facilities in pursuit of APG business, outside organisations and individuals associated with APGs are not entitled to use the Assembly’s resources.

To facilitate APGs in holding remote/virtual meetings, the Assembly Information Systems Office will provide access to video meeting capabilities within Microsoft Teams. Members can access Microsoft Teams using their Assembly supplied ICT equipment or their personal computing devices. Outside individuals associated with APGs are permitted to be invited as guests to the APG Microsoft Teams environment by the APG Chairperson (or, in the absence of the Chairperson, by the Deputy Chairperson). The Assembly Information Systems Office cannot provide technical support for APG meetings, however, guidance will be issued on how to use Microsoft Teams for remote/virtual meetings including inviting guest access and arranging remote/virtual meetings.

If an APG wishes to be enabled to hold remote/virtual meetings on Microsoft Teams the Chairperson of the APG should make a formal request to the Assembly Information Systems Office Helpdesk at the following email address:

[ITHelpdeskEmail@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:ITHelpdeskEmail@niassembly.gov.uk)

Finally, I should inform you that most of the staff in Parliament Buildings are working remotely so any form of contact in relation to APGs should be done through email – the contact list attached at **Appendix 2** contains relevant email addresses should you require any applicable assistance over the coming weeks.

If you require any further clarification on any aspect of this guidance please email the Standards & Privileges Committee office at the following address:

[committee.standardsprivileges@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:committee.standardsprivileges@niassembly.gov.uk)

**Sinéad Ennis**  
**Chairperson**  
**Committee on Standards and Privileges**

**21 April 2020**

## **Appendix 1 – APN Template for providing notice of a virtual meeting of an APG**

[    date    ]

APN:

### **NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY**

#### **ALL PARTY NOTICE**

#### **ALL PARTY GROUP ON [        insert title of group        ]**

A remote/virtual meeting of the All-Party Group on [ insert title of group] has been arranged to take place on [ insert day and date ] at [ insert time ] using the Microsoft Teams application.

[ Further details can be included here e.g. who will be addressing the meeting and the subject matter, if relevant].

All Members are welcome to attend.

An invite will be emailed separately to each Member providing instruction on how to join the remote/virtual meeting on Microsoft Teams.

For further information please contact [ insert name ] on [ insert telephone number] or email [ insert email address].

#### **All Party Notices can only be issued by the Business Office.**

Templates should be forwarded to the Clerk of Plenary Business, Room 32, Parliament Buildings, Stormont (Fax: 90 (5)21962) or emailed to the Business Office on [business.office@niassembly.gov.uk](mailto:business.office@niassembly.gov.uk)

## **Appendix 2 – Contact List**



### **Northern Ireland Assembly**

#### **COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS AND PRIVILEGES**

#### **Contact Information re: Administering All-Party Groups (April 2020)**

<b>Task</b>	<b>Contact</b>
<p>To receive advice on any aspect of forming/administering an All-Party Group or the declaration of financial benefits associated with it.</p> <p>Submitting in writing any changes to the initial registration including any change of office bearers (see para 4.3 of the Rules).</p> <p>Submitting an 'All-Party Group Update Form – Financial or Other Benefits received' within 28 days of receipt of any financial or other material benefit received by the group (see paras 5.6 – 5.9 of the Rules).</p> <p>Submitting an 'All-Party Group – Annual Return Form' following the Annual General</p>	<p>Clerk of Standards</p> <p>Room 254</p> <p>Parliament Buildings</p> <p>Belfast BT4 3XX</p> <p>Email:</p> <p><a href="mailto:Committee.standardsprivileges@niassembly.gov.uk">Committee.standardsprivileges@niassembly.gov.uk</a></p> <p>Tel: 028 9052 1372/02890520333</p>

<p>Meeting of the APG (see para 5.11 of the Rules).</p> <p>Submitting an 'All-Party Group – New Mandate Update Form' at the start of a new Mandate (see para 5.12 of the Rules).</p> <p>In the event of the Chairperson of the group changing – submitting a Registration Form incorporating the Declaration of Compliance with the Rules (See para 7.2 of the Rules).</p>	
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Task	Contact
To have an APG set up on Microsoft Teams for the purpose of <b>holding remote/virtual meetings</b>	Assembly Information Systems Office (ISO) Helpdesk <a href="mailto:ITHelpdeskEmail@niassembly.gov.uk">ITHelpdeskEmail@niassembly.gov.uk</a>
Updating information on the Group's page on the Assembly website and submitting an 'All-Party Group - Request to Link to an External Website' form (See paras 6.1 and 6.5 of the Rules).	<a href="mailto:committee.standardsprivileges@niassembly.gov.uk">committee.standardsprivileges@niassembly.gov.uk</a>
<b>Requesting electronic copies of APG Forms</b>	
Informing the Ushers Service of names of people who will be attending forthcoming meetings; together with any special access requirements for Parliament Buildings.	<a href="mailto:UsheroptionsDL@niassembly.gov.uk">UsheroptionsDL@niassembly.gov.uk</a> Copy to: <a href="mailto:Andrew.Larmour@niassembly.gov.uk">Andrew.Larmour@niassembly.gov.uk</a>

Health & Safety template briefing agreed by NI Assembly Health and Safety Office for external attendees of APG meetings.	Will be emailed when room booking is made and should be read out at start of each APG meeting.  In case of queries: <a href="mailto:Richard.anderson@niassembly.gov.uk">Richard.anderson@niassembly.gov.uk</a>
Forwarding an All-Party Notice for distribution to all Members informing them of details of APG meetings (including the Annual General Meeting of the Group).	<a href="mailto:business.office@niassembly.gov.uk">business.office@niassembly.gov.uk</a>  <b>See note below</b>
Booking a meeting room (21, 29, 30 or Senate) and hospitality (see paras 6.2 and 6.3 of the Rules). <b>Requests must be made by email stating full details of meeting.</b>	<a href="mailto:committee.office@niassembly.gov.uk">committee.office@niassembly.gov.uk</a>

**APN note:**

Please note that requests to the Assembly Business Office should come from the Chairperson of the APG (or be made on their behalf by their support staff based in Parliament Buildings). If such requests are communicated via an external source (i.e. the APG secretariat) the Chairperson must be copied into the communication.