

The Chairs' Forum

COVID-19 and Assembly committees: Factsheet

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This factsheet provides information for committee chairs, committee members, and stakeholders on how committee business in the Assembly has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Are committees meeting?

At the moment, **committees are not meeting**.

The Business Committee has asked that committees should not meet at the present time, with an expectation that the smaller [Emergency Senedd](#) will undertake essential committee functions, including scrutiny of Welsh Ministers and essential legislation.

This is to ensure the safety of committee members, staff, stakeholders and the wider public, based on the latest public health advice.

When will committees meet again?

Normal business will be resumed as soon as it is safe for this to happen.

It is not possible to provide a precise timescale for this at the moment, as it will depend on the epidemiology of COVID-19, and the duration of current efforts to control the virus.

Following the successful remote meeting of the Emergency Senedd on 1 April 2020, the Assembly Commission is currently trialling a range of technological approaches to enable remote committee meetings and it is hoped that this will enable committee meetings to take place safely in the future.

The Business Committee discussed this at its meeting on 3 April 2020. As both the Business Committee and Plenary are successfully meeting virtually, Assembly officials have been asked to provide a paper to outline the

essential business that is likely to come to committees and how this might be facilitated. **The Business Committee will be considering this at its meeting on 17 April 2020.**

As part of the initial procedural changes made in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Assembly has already taken steps to enable committees to meet without the public present and without broadcasting requirements, in certain circumstances. If further procedural adjustment is needed to enable committees to work remotely, then this will be considered by the Business Committee.

In addition to technological and procedural innovation, Assembly Commission staff resources to support remote meeting will need to be considered in light of the additional challenges current circumstances have created e.g. the possibility of increased sickness rates and caring responsibilities. The Business Committee is keen to work with the Assembly Commission to ensure that future meeting arrangements are supportable and do not place an unreasonable or unsustainable demand on staff.

What about committee work that takes place outside committee meetings?

Some work might be possible, but it is likely to be constrained by a number of factors.

There is no formal restriction on committee activity that takes place outside committee meetings e.g. evidence gathering, issuing correspondence, and reporting.

However, the ability of committees to undertake these functions is likely to be limited by their inability to meet at the present time.

Additionally, committees will wish to be mindful of how their activities can affect the resources available within the Welsh Government and other organisations to respond to COVID-19. Current government restrictions and the possibility of heightened rates of absence are also likely to place pressures on those that a committee would wish to engage with.

Ultimately, the decision on whether to undertake activity outside a committee meeting rests with each individual committee chair.

Some committees have agreed to receive regular topical briefings on developments within their areas of responsibility so that they are prepared to return to business quickly, once safe to do so.

The Business Committee will consider how the future work of committees can be facilitated, at its meeting on 17 April 2020. A further update will be provided following this meeting.

Is the Assembly rising for an Easter recess?

Yes, the Assembly is rising for a short Easter recess from 9 to 21 April 2020.

During the weeks commencing 30 March and 6 April 2020, the Assembly continued meeting (albeit remotely) in a special Emergency Senedd configuration, rather than entering the period of recess that had originally been planned.

This was to ensure that the people of Wales continued to be represented at such a critical time, that the Welsh Government remained accountable for the significant decisions it was taking in relation to COVID-19, and essential laws could be passed or progressed.

On 3 April 2020, the Business Committee agreed to a short recess from 9 to 21 April 2020, during which time recall arrangements can be utilised should circumstances require the Assembly to meet.

How will the Welsh Government be held to account if committees are not meeting?

The Emergency Senedd has provided Assembly Members with an opportunity to hold the Welsh Government to account whilst arrangements for remote committee meetings are explored further.

What about committee scrutiny of Bills and other legislation?

Scrutiny of essential legislation will continue. The detail of how this will work is being developed.

Bill scrutiny

The Welsh Government is currently reprioritising its legislative programme.

Details of this reprioritisation have been discussed with the Business Committee, but final decisions have yet to be taken by the Welsh Government.

The likelihood is that the scrutiny of some Bills will be paused so that efforts can be focused on those Bills deemed a Government priority.

Options for detailed scrutiny of the priority Bills, once identified, will be considered. Options could include utilising remote meeting technology for committees, should it be available, or managing the amending stages through Plenary.

Arrangements will be made for Assembly Members to table amendments remotely. Members can expect to receive the support they are accustomed to when drafting amendments to Bills, albeit remotely.

Statutory Instruments

The functions ordinarily undertaken by the Legislation, Justice and Constitution Committee in relation to the scrutiny of statutory instruments are to be temporarily suspended, with a revised scrutiny mechanism operating through the Assembly in Plenary.

The background analysis and support currently provided to the Legislation, Justice and Constitution Committee by Assembly officials will be provided to the Assembly when undertaking these functions.

Legislative consent

The legislative consent convention continues to apply and it is the Welsh Government's intention to observe the convention by laying legislative consent memorandums and tabling legislative consent motions where necessary.

The Business Committee will consider whether to refer LCMs to a committee for scrutiny on a case by case basis.

Committee Services

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