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TO: PS/FIRST MINISTER
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FORTNIGHTLY EXECUTIVE MEETINGS

Mr. G. Martin

Purpose

1. At the last meeting with Ministers, it was agreed that a paper would be brought forward setting out the benefits and implications of a move to fortnightly Executive meetings.

Drawbacks of weekly meetings

2. Despite major efforts by Ministers, Advisers and officials in OFMDFM, the scheduling of Executive meetings on a weekly basis has continued to cause difficulties with issuing Executive papers to the agreed time scales to enable Ministers, and Ministerial Representatives, to give them adequate consideration before meetings. The (theoretical) processes for dealing with Executive papers (including OFMDFM papers) and agenda is described in Annex A.
3. The Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday of any week in which an Executive meeting is held are largely spent in preparing and briefing for, and attendance at, that meeting. The effect of this, if meetings are held weekly, is that agreement by the First and Deputy First Ministers of the papers and agenda for the following meeting have been compressed into the Friday of that week, often resulting in the very late issue of papers on the Friday, or even delay until the next Monday, which has a knock on effect for other Ministers and Departments in their preparation for the next meeting.

4. It has also proved difficult for the First Minister and Deputy First Minister to clear the minutes of a meeting in order to issue them 2 days before the next meeting for consideration by other Ministers. We are often a week or more behind on Executive minutes.

Benefits and implications of fortnightly meetings

5. A move to fortnightly meetings could enable a more focused approach to be taken and lead to greater consistency and coherence in dealing with Executive business.
6. Such a move would need to be supported by
- (i) the acceptance and application of the need to begin the process of preparing Executive papers at an earlier stage and agreement that Executive papers would be issued on the Thursday (rather than the Friday) before the meeting;
 - (ii) greater involvement of Ministerial Representatives in the preparation for Executive meetings;
 - (iii) the extended use of the Written Procedure to clear non-controversial business; and
 - (iv) possibly, Executive sub-committees dealing with certain categories of business.

Process

7. Irrespective of a move to fortnightly meetings, if we are to improve the handling of Executive business, there is a need to review and improve the process surrounding the preparation of Executive papers and agenda. Some progress on this front has been made through the

Ministerial Representatives' Committee, but further work is needed. A move to fortnightly Executive meetings would make it more feasible to achieve progress.

8. All Departments, including in particular OFMDFM and DFP, would need to commit themselves to adhering to the process set out in Annex A, and to embrace the need to plan and organise their business to considerably earlier timescales than at present. This will require a considerable change in approach, particularly in relation to financial matters. There will obviously have to be some flexibility for genuinely urgent business, but there is scope to recognise that many 'deadlines' might be avoided with greater advance planning.

Role of Ministerial Representatives Committee, including in relation to Written Procedure

9. Under any new arrangements for fortnightly meetings, it is proposed that meetings of the Ministerial Representatives Committee would continue to be held weekly, normally on Mondays. On the Monday following the Executive, the Representatives would receive the report from the meeting and be made aware of action to be taken. Progress in relation to papers for the next Executive meeting would also be reported. At the MRC meeting on the Monday prior to the Executive meeting, Representatives would report, and seek to resolve, any issues likely to arise at that meeting.
10. The Ministerial Representatives could identify any issues which were non-controversial to be dealt with by written procedure.
11. The written procedure could also be used for genuinely urgent business between Executive meetings, with the Ministerial Representatives network being used to broker agreement on issues arising.

Executive sub-committees

12. Executive sub-committees might be established to deal with certain categories of Executive business, eg, planning Executive business in the Assembly, agreeing the Legislative Programme, etc. However, if such an arrangement was to be beneficial in relation to the move to fortnightly meetings, it would be essential that such sub committees had decision making powers.

Conclusion

13. It is recommended that, to facilitate the smooth running of Executive business, Executive meetings should be held on a fortnightly basis, with Ministerial Representatives continuing to meet weekly and playing an active role in identifying and resolving issues arising in relation to Executive business.

Tony McCusker

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ANNEX A

PROCESS FOR DEALING WITH EXECUTIVE PAPERS AND AGENDA

Comments on draft Executive Memoranda

1. Under the terms of the Ministerial Code, a Minister wishing to table a Memorandum at the Executive should circulate for comment a draft of the Memorandum to the First Minister and Deputy First Minister and to any other Minister who has an interest in the subject; this will almost always include the Minister of Finance and Personnel. The draft should be issued 2 weeks before the meeting at which it is to be tabled.
2. The First Minister and Deputy First Minister may comment at this stage in respect of:
 - (i) their role in co-ordinating Executive business as Chairmen of the Executive; and
 - (ii) their Departmental responsibilities, such as equality and human rights aspects.

(There is a separate freestanding requirement for EPU input to many DFP papers which should take place before the draft memorandum is circulated.)
3. The originating Minister should consider all comments and seek to resolve them on a bilateral basis with colleagues. Where this is not possible, the comments should be reflected in the final version of the memorandum, together with the originating Minister's views and recommendations, for consideration by the Executive.

4. The timescale for the stages between issue of a draft memorandum and its being tabled at the Executive is:

Action	Timing	
Draft memorandum circulated to relevant Ministers	Day 1	Thursday 2 weeks before Executive meeting
Comments from Ministers on draft Memorandum	By Day 5	Monday
Discussions between relevant Min Reps if necessary	Days 6-8	Tues-Thurs – MRC or Bilateral meetings
Memorandum issued to Executive	By Day 9	By Friday
Tabled at Executive meeting	Day 15	Thursday

Agreeing the Agenda

5. If the procedures described above have been followed, the only decision to be taken by the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister as to when a memorandum should be on the agenda for a particular meeting will relate to the urgency of dealing with that business and the overall balance of the agenda. It is not a requirement for the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister to “clear” or “agree” any memorandum before it is included on the agenda and tabled at the Executive. Provided they have had the opportunity to have any unresolved concerns reflected in the paper, it will be a matter for the Executive to discuss these views along with those of other colleagues.

OFMDFM Executive Memoranda

6. While OFMDFM has originated the majority of Executive papers to date, it has not been very successful in adhering to the required process. If OFMDFM is to press departments to meet the requirements of the Ministerial Code, it will have to endeavour to do so also. Since all OFMDFM Executive papers will have cross cutting implications, they should be circulated to all Ministers in draft for comment. In effect this

means that these papers, cleared as necessary by junior Ministers, should be submitted to the First Minister and the Deputy First Minister by officials two and a half weeks before the meeting at which they are to be considered for approval to circulate them to other Ministers. This requirement would also apply to DFP whose adherence to the Code, like OFMDFM's is honoured more in the breach than in the observance.

7	By Thursday 7 weeks before Executive	Draft documents for consideration at meeting on 14/10/05 to relevant Ministers
14	By Monday 10 days before Executive	Comments from relevant Ministers on draft memoranda
15	Monday	Ministerial Representatives Committee meets to discuss papers arising from draft memoranda and plan for following meeting
16	Thursday	Executive papers issued
17	Monday	Ministerial Representatives Committee meets to discuss papers for Executive meeting and advise of issues likely to arise (including on AOB and Minutes)
18	Thursday	Executive meeting held
19	Friday	Draft minutes to OFMDFM
20	Monday	Ministerial Representatives Committee meets for feedback on Executive meeting
22	Thursday	Minutes issued

ANNEX B

PROCESS IN RELATION TO AN EXECUTIVE MEETING

DAY		ACTION FOR EXECUTIVE MEETING ON DAY 15
1	By Thursday 2 weeks before Executive	Draft memoranda for consideration at meeting circulated to relevant Ministers
5	By Monday 10 days before Executive	Comments from relevant Ministers on draft memoranda
5	Monday	Ministerial Representatives Committee meets to discuss issues arising from draft memoranda and plan for following meeting
8	Thursday	Executive papers issued
12	Monday	Ministerial Representatives Committee meets to discuss papers for Executive meeting and advise of issues likely to arise (including on AOB and Minutes)
15	Thursday	Executive meeting held
16	Friday	Draft minutes to FM/DFM
19	Monday	Ministerial Representatives Committee meets for feedback on Executive meeting
22	Thursday	Minutes issued