

Dear Elaine

Thank you for your email of 3 April in which you formally request that the Scottish Parliament is recalled for the purpose of holding a question session with the First Minister on the Scottish Government's response to Covid-19 both this week and next. Thank you too for your subsequent email of 6 April asking that Parliament is recalled to hold the Scottish Government to account in relation to issues surrounding the Chief Medical Officer's resignation and the tragic deaths at Burlington Care Home over the weekend. I have taken the opportunity in this response to address each of the points you raise in your two emails in turn.

You will be aware that the Parliamentary Bureau and I share your view that it is more important than ever that our democracy continues to function as we face the most significant public health crisis of our lifetime. In all our decisions, we have been careful to strike a balance between enabling the crucial scrutiny of the Scottish Government's response to this crisis to continue, while taking steps to protect the safety of our members and staff. It is with these matters firmly at the forefront of our minds that the Bureau last week proposed that the Parliament next sits on Tuesday 21 April. This business programme was then unanimously agreed by the Parliament on the evening of Wednesday 1 April. Both at Bureau and in Parliament, every Member from every political party supported and voted for the proposal for Parliament to go into recess.

Notwithstanding the cross-party agreement on 1 April, I have taken soundings from other business managers to inform my decision on whether to recall, as is usual in these circumstances. At the time I spoke with business managers yesterday, the situations you refer to in your email of today were already unfolding. On the basis of these discussions, I am not minded to recall Parliament at this time. As I said in my closing remarks to the Chamber on Thursday, the parliamentary authorities and I are keeping the situation under daily review and are ready to respond to however the situation evolves. This remains the case.

In your email of 3 April you also asked that a system of virtual working for the Parliament is introduced quickly and that, failing this, a fair system of representation in the Chamber for voting purposes is implemented. As you will be aware, this is a matter which Parliamentary officials have been actively pursuing and which we have discussed both in the Bureau and in the SPCB over the last couple of weeks. I am pleased to update you that officials are currently very busy examining and testing a range of options for virtual working and the progress they are making is very encouraging indeed. These options will be considered by the Bureau, Conveners Group and SPCB next week at virtual meetings. As I have explained previously, it is not for Parliament to limit the numbers of members attending the Parliament. Equally it is not for the Parliament to broker pairing arrangements or agreements between the political parties. There are however other practical proposals that would be for the Parliament to consider, including proxy voting, and these are also being looked at and will be included in the options for Bureau to consider.

You also formally requested in your earlier email that a dedicated Covid Committee is established as soon as possible. This proposal will be considered by the Bureau at its virtual meeting next week and in the meantime, I am aware that business managers

will be considering the matter within their parties. Indeed, I understand that the Conservative Party has its own views and alternative proposals on the establishment of a committee. As you would expect, Conveners Group will of course also wish to input the views of committees given Conveners would play such an important role on the committee as proposed by Anas Sarwar.

As ever, I am grateful to you and your colleagues for your input and assistance as we navigate our way through these challenging times. I am as always very happy to discuss any of these issues with you if it would be helpful.

Given how quickly events develop in dealing with the Covid outbreak, I thought it would be helpful to call a meeting of the Bureau at our regular time of 12 noon tomorrow. This will give me the opportunity to update business managers, including yourself, on the work Parliamentary officials are taking forward and also to explore the various proposals for a Covid Committee which we can consider in depth next week.

Finally, thank you for your kind words of thanks to all staff for their hard work in supporting the Parliament at this very difficult time. I will of course pass these on and I know they will be very much appreciated.

Take care and best wishes,

Ken

Rt Hon Ken Macintosh MSP
Presiding Officer