

COMMITTEE FOR AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL AFFAIRS

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS

THURSDAY 18 FEBRUARY 2021
VIRTUAL MEETING, STARLEAF

Present: Mr Declan McAleer MLA (Chairperson)
Mr Philip McGuigan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Ms Clare Bailey MLA
Mrs Rosemary Barton MLA
Mr John Blair MLA
Mr Maurice Bradley MLA
Mr Harry Harvey MLA
Mr William Irwin MLA
Mr Patsy McGlone MLA

In attendance: Ms Stella McArdle, Committee Clerk
Ms Barbara Love, Committee Clerk
Ms Elaine Farrell, Assistant Clerk
Ms Marion Johnson, Clerical Supervisor
Ms Kate Duffy, Clerical Officer

The Committee commenced at 10.02 a.m. in Closed Session

1. Matters arising

The Committee discussed its approach to its work on the withdrawal of DAERA and Local Authority staff at the ports.

Mr McGlone joined the meeting at 10.07 a.m.

The Committee discussed its approach to the draft motion on Nature Friendly Farming.

The Committee discussed its response to the DAERA budget proposals.

The meeting moved into Open Session at 10.38 a.m.

The Committee discussed the Terms of Reference and Action Plan for the Committee work on the withdrawal of DAERA and Local Authority staff at the ports.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Terms of Reference for its work on the withdrawal of DAERA and Local Authority staff at the ports.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the list of organisations it wishes to receive written and oral evidence from and the dates for the oral and written evidence.

Noted: The Committee noted that DUP Committee Members registered their objection to the motion.

The Committee discussed the proposed draft motion on Nature Friendly Farming.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the list of organisations/witnesses it wishes to receive oral and written evidence from and the dates, in addition to evidence from a 'nature friendly' farmer.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to revisit the wording of the motion upon completion of the gathering of evidence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commission a research paper from RalSe on the role that agricultural policy has played in nature conservation, preservation and enhancement both present and future across the UK and Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee to schedule an oral briefing with the Department for the meeting on 23 April 2021.

The Committee discussed its response to the Department's Budget 2021-2022 proposal.

Agreed: The Committee agreed its budget report and agreed to forward it to the Finance Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request budgetary information on Arms Lengths Bodies and the

interim arrangements on governance gaps in respect of the Office of Environmental Protection.

2. Apologies

None.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson advised the Committee that he will be attending at private informal meeting in his capacity as Chairperson with the NI Affairs Committee on 2 March 2021 to discuss issues with Brexit and the Protocol.

4. Minutes of the meeting held on 11 February 2021

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 11 February 2021.

5. Departmental Oral Evidence: Update on the Climate Change Bill Discussion Document and Policy Proposals for the draft Bill.

The Chairperson advised the Committee that the Department has failed to provide any briefing papers for the agenda item, therefore it has been deferred until the meeting on 25 February 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Permanent Secretary to outline its disappointment and frustration at the continued failure of the Department to provide briefing papers to the Committee in a timely manner.

6. Oral Evidence RSPB: Risk to the natural environment from Statutory Rules Regulations

The following RSPB representatives joined the meeting via StarLeaf at 10.43 a.m.

Philip Carson, Land Use Policy Officer
Jonathan Bell, Head of Land and Sea Policy

The representatives briefed the Committee and this was followed by a question and answer session.

Noted: The Committee noted the RSPB had discussed its concerns with the Department and had now been given clarification on

a number of issues it had raised in relation to the reduction of inspection rates.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance.

7. Draft SR: The Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Noted: The Committee noted that the Examiner of Statutory has not identified any issues with the Regulations in her report.

Question put and agreed:

‘That the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has considered Draft SR: The Direct Payments to Farmers (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) and has no objections to the Rule’.

8. Draft SR: The Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021

Noted: The Committee noted that the Examiner of Statutory has not identified any issues with the Regulations in her report.

Question put and agreed:

‘That the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has considered Draft SR: The Direct Payments to Farmers (Simplification) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021 and has no objections to the Rule.’

9. Written Briefing DAERA: SL1 The Zoonoses and Diseases of Animals (Amendment) Order 2021

The Committee noted the departmental briefing on SL1 The Zoonoses and Diseases of Animals (Amendment) Order 2021 which will ensure that the Department is notified when SARS-Cov-2 is detected in animals in order for the appropriate legislation to be made to provide for a cull of infected animals and the associated compensation to owners.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content with the merits of the policy and that it should move to the next legislative stage.

10. Written Briefing: Committee Consideration of LAGs responses to Future Rural Policy Development

The Committee discussed the responses it received from LAGs to the Future Rural Policy Development and acknowledged the comprehensive replies.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to place the LAG responses onto the Committee webpage. The Committee agreed to contact those LAGs that had not yet responded encouraging them to do so.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department on a range of issues which have been identified by the LAGs on the Future Rural Policy and to advise that the responses from the LAGs will be placed on the Committee webpage.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a written briefing on the impact of Covid-19 on LAGs and the uncertainty that exists around future funding.

11. Written Briefing DAERA: Proposal to introduce a Protein Crop Payment Pilot Scheme 2021-2022

Noted: The Committee noted the departmental written briefing on the Proposal to introduce a Protein Crop Payment Pilot Scheme 2021 following its consultation.

12. Written Briefing DAERA: 30 Year Strategy

Agreed: The Committee noted the departmental written briefing on the 30 Year Strategy and agreed to forward any questions for the Department to the clerk by close of play.

13. Correspondence

The Committee noted the following:

- i. The laying of Annual Reports and Accounts (ARA) for Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority 2019-2020 before the NI Assembly.
- ii. Correspondence from Brian Little on issues with the Independent Panel on Review of Decisions.
- iii. Correspondence from Mrs Dolores Kelly MLA on her Private Members Bill on The Environment and Nature Restoration Bill.
- iv. Correspondence from Manufacturing NI on its survey of manufacturing businesses and their experience of the Protocol during the first week of February 2021.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Renewable Heat Association (RHA) on issues it has identified with the RHI Scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the RHA to advise that it the Committee does not have a remit for the RHI Scheme and to suggest that it contacts the Department for the Economy and the Committee for the Economy.

The Committee considered correspondence from Minister Lyons in response to a request from the Committee for a briefing on his priorities, which advises that he expects his tenure as Minister to be short, therefore he does not intend to brief to the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister to express disappointment that he has already met with various stakeholders and has not afforded the Committee the same courtesy. Furthermore, the Committee agreed to again request that the Minister meets with the Committee at his earliest convenience.

The Committee considered correspondence from Shared Environmental Services (SES) in respect of the Committee invitation to brief the Committee on its role and remit.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to SES to advise of its discontent at the lack of engagement and reluctance to meet with the Committee and to request that it agrees to a date to brief the Committee as soon as possible.

14. Forward Work Programme

Agreed: The Committee note agreed to participate in a round table event with the BEIS Committee on COP 26 at a future date.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to attend an event organised by the BEIS Committee as part of the COP 26 activity on international parliamentary climate change scrutiny.

Noted: The Committee noted the joint meeting with the Committees for the Economy and Infrastructure, HMRC/TSS has been arranged for 24 March 2021.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Forward Work Programme.

15. AOB

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister Frost and Eustace on the issue with the importation of trees from Britain and the impact this is having.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department on the impact of importation of trees is having on various initiatives including the Department's recent tree planting scheme, climate change and the Woodland Expansion Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for the Economy regarding numerous issues with the RHI Scheme and the impact on farming which are being highlighted on a regular basis and to request an update on what is being done to progress them.

16. Date and time of the next meeting

The next virtual meeting virtual of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural affairs will take place on Thursday 25 February 2021 at 10.00 a.m. and will be streamed from Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 11.25 a.m.

Declan McAleer, Chairperson, Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development

Date