



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Minutes of Proceedings

Wednesday 16 March 2022

Meeting Location: Virtual Meeting via StarLeaf

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Declan McAleer (Chairperson)
Philip McGuigan MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Clare Bailey MLA
Rosemary Barton MLA
John Blair MLA
Harry Harvey MLA
William Irwin MLA
Patsy McGlone MLA

Apologies: Thomas Buchanan MLA

In Attendance: Nick Henry, Clerk
Oliver Bellew, Assistant Clerk
Emma Magee, Clerical Officer
Elaine Farrell, Clerical Supervisor

The meeting commenced at 9.34 a.m. in open session

1. Apologies

None

2. Chairperson's Business

EU Commission Report on SPS Checks

The Committee noted a response from the Department to its queries on the EU Commission's Report on SPS Checks Compliance.

Members noted that the response did not provide sufficient answers to a number of questions raised by the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to highlight the shortcomings in the response and to express disappointment at the quality of information provided and lack of assurance in its handling of the Report.

Mid and East Antrim Borough Council Correspondence with Cabinet Office

The Chairperson informed Members that the Clerk had liaised with Mid and East Antrim Borough Council in respect of the Committee's recommendation that MEABC write to the Cabinet Office to clarify potential threats to Port Staff as of February 2021.

Members noted that the matter had not been considered at the Council meeting on 7 March given changes to the senior management team at the Council but that assurance had been given that it would be considered at the April full council meeting.

New Permanent Secretary

The Chairperson informed Members of correspondence received from the Head of the Civil Service to advise of the appointment of Katrina Godfrey as Permanent Secretary of the Department.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Ms Godfrey to wish her well in her new post.

3. Draft Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 10 March 2022.

4. Matters Arising

Strategies Necessitating Executive Approval

The Committee noted correspondence from the Department in respect of strategies which will require Executive approval. The Department advised that it would seek Executive input and approval for the:

- Environment Strategy
- Green Growth Strategy
- Peatlands Strategy
- Food Strategy Framework

The Committee noted that the Department had intended bringing bovine TB eradication proposals to the Executive but given its absence, will seek alternative options.

Common Agricultural Policy (Cross Compliance Exemptions and Transitional Regulation) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2022

The Chairperson reminded Members that the Committee had previously considered the proposals and had expressed concern that local horticultural producers had not been notified of changes to the Fruit and Vegetable Aid Scheme that was scheduled to come into effect.

The Committee noted that, following the Committee's request, the Department has informed local producer organisations and given an assurance to engage with horticultural stakeholders on future schemes.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to express its contentment for the Minister's consent to the regulations.

5. Oral Briefing: DAERA Minister – Pressures Facing the Agri-Food Chain

Members recalled the Committee's invitation to the Minister to discuss issues relating to increased production costs for the agri-food sector which had been compounded by the situation in Ukraine.

The Committee noted a Departmental written briefing which highlighted the Minister's meeting with UK counterparts to discuss the impact of the Ukraine situation. Members also noted a memo by the Clerk which contained a summary of media reports on the impact on the local agri-food sector and consumers in general.

Relatedly, the Committee welcomed the Department's announcement of a £2 million support scheme for local pig farmers.

The Chairperson welcomed the following officials and invited them to brief the Committee:

Edwin Poots – Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Seamus McErlean – Chief Economist, DAERA

Mark Livingstone – Director, Food Supply Security, DAERA

Jonathan McFerran – Head of Private Office, DAERA

The Minister briefed the Committee. This was followed by questions from Members.

The Chairperson thanked the Minister for the briefing and for his, and his Officials', co-operation throughout the Mandate.

6. Oral Briefing: Stakeholders – Organic Production Provisional Common Framework

The Committee noted a copy of the draft Organic Production Provisional Common Framework and a briefing paper by the Clerk which summarised the key points of the proposals.

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives and invited them to brief the Committee:

Maeve Cairney – Irish Organic Association

Stephen Clarkson – Organic Farmers and Growers Certification Team

David Culmore – Organics NI

Roger Kerr – Organic Farmers and Growers Certification Team

David Laughlin – Culmore Organic Farm

This was followed by questions from Members.

The Chairperson thanked the officials.

7. Oral Briefing: Kendall Report – Independent Strategic Review of Agri-Food Industry

The Committee noted a Report by Sir Peter Kendall on the Independent Strategic Review of the Agri-Food Industry, which had been jointly commissioned by the Ministers of the Economy and Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Members noted a briefing memo by the Clerk which contained the key points of the Review and its Report.

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives and invited them to brief the Committee:

Sir Peter Kendall – Chair, Review Team and Member of the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board

Dr Jonathan Birnie – Member, Review Team and Managing Director, Birnie Consultancy

Julie Robinson – Member, Review Team and Partner in Law, Roythornes Solicitors

11.44 a.m. The Chairperson left the meeting and the Deputy Chairperson assumed the Chair.

12.00 p.m. The Chairperson re-joined the meeting and assumed the Chair.

12.26 p.m. William Irwin left the meeting.

This was followed by questions from Members.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for the briefing.

8. Oral Briefing: Key Stakeholders – Supply Chain Issues due to the On-going Crisis in Ukraine

The Chairperson informed Members that, further to the Ministerial briefing, a number of key stakeholders had been invited to give evidence on supply chain issues due to the on-going crisis in Ukraine.

The Chairperson welcomed the following representatives and invited them to brief the Committee:

Victor Chestnutt – Ulster Farmers Union

Gill Gallagher – NI Grain Trade Association

Mike Johnston – Dairy Council

Deirdre McIvor – NI Pork and Bacon Forum

This was followed by questions from Members.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for clarity on the detail of the Minister's bid for £70 million to support the agri-food sector and on additional actions the Department should consider in its response to the crisis.

9. Written Briefing: DAERA – UK Marine Strategy Part Three: Programme of Measures – Summary of Responses

The Committee noted a summary of responses to the Department's UK Marine Strategy Part Three: Programme of Measures consultation, which closed on 29 November 2021.

The Chairperson informed Members that all respondents to the consultation believed that the proposals would be insufficient to achieve and maintain Good Environmental Status and that DEFRA and DAERA had committed to engaging with stakeholders to address the issues before an updated Programme of Measures is published in June 2022.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to express its content for the final strategy to be progressed.

1.07 p.m. Philip McGuigan left the meeting.

10. Clerk's Written Briefing – Waste (Fees and Charges) (Amendment) Regulations (NI) 2022

The Committee noted a Departmental written briefing in respect of the Waste (Fees and Charges) (Amendment) Regulations NI 2022.

The Chairperson informed Members that the regulations were subject to the negative resolution procedure and that the Department had hoped to lay them in the Business Office on 18 March 2022.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to confirm its content for the rule to be laid.

11. Correspondence

- i. Ministerial correspondence to the Committee outlining the intention to make a written statement in respect of the Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report 2020-21.
- ii. Confirmation from the Executive Office that Katrina Godfrey will take up the post of Permanent Secretary to the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs from April 2022.
- iii. Correspondence between a Member of the Public and Mid and East Antrim Borough Council regarding concerns about individuals lighting fires to heat their homes and the associated health and environmental impacts.
- iv. Correspondence from the Committee for Infrastructure to the Treasury seeking a delay to the impending removal of the rebated fuel entitlement on red diesel and introduction of fuel duty subsidy as has been introduced in the Republic of Ireland.

- v. Departmental correspondence to the Committee's queries following its meeting on 24 February 2022.
- vi. Departmental correspondence that it is assessing all options in respect of contingency measures should SPS checks required from 1 January 2021 be stopped.
- vii. Departmental response to the Committee's further questions on the consideration of the report by the EU Commission in respect of compliance with SPS checks.
- viii. Department clarity on which of its current strategies will require Executive approval for progression.
- ix. Departmental acknowledgement of the Committee's Position Paper on the proposals for the eradication of Bovine TB and that it will address the recommendations at the briefing scheduled for 24 March 2022.
- x. Departmental response to the Committee's further questions on staff in post associated with EU Exit activities.
Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for clarity on the information relating to vacancies.
- xi. Departmental correspondence containing copies of the final draft Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board (Amendment) Order 2022 Statutory Instrument and Explanatory Memorandum which will be brought forward across all jurisdictions.
- xii. Departmental acknowledgement of the Committee's concerns regarding the Agricultural and Horticultural Development (Amendment) Order 2022 statutory instrument.
- xiii. Departmental confirmation that it has notified the local Producer Organisation of future changes to the Fruit and Vegetable Aid Scheme which will be brought about via proposed regulations and request for the Committee's consent for these to proceed.
- xiv. Departmental response to the Committee's queries regarding the proposed Marine Licencing (Exempted Activities) (Amendment) Order (NI) 2022.
- xv. Departmental response to the Committee's queries regarding the communication of EU law changes which have a local effect in respect of the Protocol.
Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for clarity on the process for Executive Departments to be notified of any legislative changes notified via the Joint Committee and whether the Department has a procedure in place to notify the Committee of any potential change in EU law which intersects with the Protocol.
- xvi. Departmental acknowledgement of the Committee's Position Paper on the Future Agricultural Policy proposals and confirmation that its views will be fully considered going forward.
- xvii. Departmental response to the Committee's questions regarding the operation of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.
Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and the Department of Finance to express its concern at the proposals for the Shared Prosperity Fund.

- xviii. Departmental response to the Committee's letter of 17 February 2022 in respect of issues pertaining to the Organic Egg sector.
- xix. Departmental response to the Committee's for issues or points of note on the Fisheries Management and Support Common Framework. The Department advised that it is content with the Framework as published.
- xx. DEFRA response to queries raised by the House of Lords Protocol Scrutiny Committee in respect of the proposed regulations governing transit of wastes between NI and GB.

12. Forward Work Programme

Agreed: The Committee agreed the draft Forward Work Programme.

13. Any other Business

Agreed: It was agreed that the Clerk would provide a summary of outstanding responses to Committee correspondence for the meeting on Thursday 24 March 2022.

14. Date, time and place of the next meeting

The next meeting of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs will take place on Thursday 24 March 2022 at 10.00 a.m. and will be a hybrid meeting streamed on the Assembly's website.

The meeting was adjourned at 1.38 p.m.

Declan McAleer MLA
Chairperson, Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
24 March 2022