



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

01 October 2026

Meeting location: Room 21 Parliament Buildings

Present: Diana Armstrong (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Áine Murphy MLA
Gareth Wilson MLA

Via Zoom: Daniel McCrossan MLA

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:05am

1. Apologies

None

2. Declaration of Interests

The Chairperson reminded Members of their responsibility to declare any interests in any of the items under discussion.

The Chairperson declared an interest due to having a farming background and in relation to an item of Matters Arising relating to Northern Ireland Horse Board having previously met with them.

Declan McAleer MLA declared an interest in the Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill and that he is an executor and owner of a small farm in Co Tyrone.

John Blair MLA declared an interest in the Hunting with Dogs Bill as the Bill Sponsor and to an item of correspondence regarding 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn as he is a member of the Audit Committee.

Áine Murphy MLA declared an interest in the Hunting with Dogs Bill as a licensed fire arms holder.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to a note of her informal policy briefing meeting on 24 September with Minister Muir and Senior DAERA Officials who provided her with an overview of progress in main policy areas to assist in her role as Chairperson of the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to a request from the National Trust to meet with her in her capacity as Chair to discuss its work and priorities in more detail.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a meeting is arranged as soon as time allows.

The Chairperson referred to a request from the Irish Livestock Exporters Association (ILTEA) to meet with her in her capacity as Chairperson to discuss concerns at the potential implications of Mercosur-origin meat imports into Great Britain for Northern Ireland agriculture, food safety, and public health.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a meeting is arranged as soon as time allows.

The Chairperson referred to a request from the Fermanagh Rural Community Network (FRCN) to meet with her in her capacity as Chairperson.

The Committee noted the FRCN had previously invited the Chairperson to attend and speak at its Annual General Meeting on Monday 19 October, but she is not available due to Assembly business.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a meeting is arranged as soon as time allows.

The Chairperson advised that the informal meeting the Committee agreed to arrange at the meeting on 24 September, with Nigel Topping, the Chair of The Climate Change Committee (CCC), will be at 1pm on Monday 19 October in Room 30 and diary invites will be issued.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that Members would respond to the invitation to confirm attendance.

The Chairperson referred to a request from the Fermanagh Chamber to meet with her in her capacity as Chair to discuss the priorities of the Chamber and explore opportunities for engagement between the business community and the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a meeting is arranged as soon as time allows.

The Chairperson referred to a request from the Causeway Coast Dogs Rescue (CCDR) to give a short address in her capacity as Chairperson on the Committee's role in scrutinising animal welfare legislation at the Animal Welfare Conference and the launch of the CCDR Animal Welfare Manifesto 2026- 2030. The event will take place on Tuesday 6 October in the Long Gallery.

Agreed: The Committee agreed for the Chairperson to attend and speak in her capacity as Chair.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 24 September 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 23 September, regarding concerns from the Northern Ireland Horse Board (NIHB) it had considered on 10 September. The NIHB had stated that it wished to see a return to the arrangements that existed prior to 2018, whereby it acted as a joint issuing body alongside Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) and Irish Draught Horse Studbooks.

The Committee noted it had also written to DAFM on the matter and considered a response, dated 23 September, from Minister Heydon advising that DAERA would issue a joint response on behalf of DAERA and DAFM.

The Committee noted that the joint response highlighted that DAFM states NIHB did not operate as a joint issuing body, that this status was never formally recognised and current animal breeding legislation does not provide for a joint issuing body arrangement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note and forward the response to NIHB for further comment.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 23 September, regarding Isle of Man (IOM) Access Restrictions and the Impact on the Northern Ireland Fishing Industry.

The Committee noted on 10 September it had considered correspondence from the Chief Minister of the IOM Government on the matter and noted that it offered little reassurance and so agreed to write to the Department requesting an update on engagement undertaken by the Minister and Departmental Officials with the IOM Government.

The Committee noted the response detailed any engagement to date with IOM immigration and with company registration authorities and has facilitated contacts with industry representatives to explore practical arrangements.

The Committee also noted on 11 August 2026, Minister Muir wrote to the UK Minister for Migration and Citizenship, setting out the particular issues for the NI fishing industry, including the case for a bespoke seasonal visa and that the UK government response to the Minister focused on developing the domestic workforce and did not specifically address the IOM concerns.

The Committee also noted the Minister is due to raise recruitment issues with the Interim Chair of the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) in October.

The Committee noted that the response still provides no comfort to the fishing industry and proposed that it writes to the Home Office regarding the need to expediate proposals for a bespoke seasonal visa. Also, that it was unacceptable that the UK Minister for Migration and Citizenship did not address the substantive issue in its correspondence to Minister Muir.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Home Office requesting an update on any discussions with the Isle of Man Government on this issue and whether it intends to consider bespoke arrangements for the fishing sector in Northern Ireland.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 23 September, regarding the Independent External Review of the Fivemiletown Cattle Cull Operation. The Committee noted on 10 September it agreed to write to the Department in relation to issues raised during the informal meeting with Dr Martin Blake on 7 September.

The Committee noted the response states that an independent e-mail address is operational and has been advertised to ensure any witnesses or members of the public could provide evidence directly to Dr. Blake.

The Committee also noted in relation to retention and availability of records, the Department states all relevant records held by the Department have been made

available to the Dr Blake as required and in accordance with the review's Terms of Reference.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to confirm if Dr Blake intends to brief the Committee on the completion of his review and, if so, whether an indicative date can be provided.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 24 September, regarding the Potential Regulatory Changes Affecting Cooking Oil.

The Committee noted that the matter was raised as an item of AOB on 17 September and it agreed to write to the Department for some clarification.

The Committee noted the response states that, in line with the Windsor Framework, upcoming regulatory requirements for soya and palm oils fall under the direction and control of the Secretary of State for Defra and are related to the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR).

The Committee noted that DAERA will function as the Competent Authority in Northern Ireland for five of the seven commodities covered by the Regulation; the EUDR will apply from 30 December 2026 for large and medium-sized enterprises, and the UK Government has published guidance for businesses outlining how the EUDR will operate in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 25 September, regarding the Animal Welfare Pathway. It had considered this matter at its meeting on 10 September after correspondence from the Dogs Trust and agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on legislation to prohibit the third-party sale and supply of puppies, and sale of kittens.

The Committee noted work has been paused on the setting up of an Implementation Group due to councils' concerns regarding funding and IT resources for the registration system and a phased approach is now being undertaken.

The Committee noted Phase one will introduce legislation to prohibit third-party sales and supplies of puppies, and sales of kittens, and will introduce related sales and advertising conditions; and Phase two, which will introduce registration requirements, remains a policy objective to be brought forward at a later date.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to Dogs Trust.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 23 September regarding a Framework for Resilience for the Fishing Sector in Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted it had considered the matter on 10 September and expressed concern at the apparent lack of urgency from the Department and agreed to write to request an indicative timetable for the preliminary scoping work.

The Committee noted that the scope, resource requirements, and arrangements for completing the work have not yet been established to enable Officials to provide a timeline, but DAERA commits to providing updates as the work progresses, including on any substantive developments or emerging conclusions.

Strong disapproval at the response from the Department was expressed and the lack of progress made in supporting the Northern Ireland fishing industry as the Department has had oversight of the matter for decades and so should already be well aware of the issues faced by the sector.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to express continued concern at the lack of progress, given that DAERA has had oversight of the issue for decades and request an update on the work being undertaken, including any planned timescales and key milestones for developing the framework to support the Northern Ireland fishing fleet.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 23 September, regarding the AFBI Organisational Action Plan to address the issues identified and to strengthen AFBI's governance and oversight arrangements

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:22am

6. SL1 - Official Controls (Plant Protection Products) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 - Departmental Oral Evidence Session.

This item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted on 24 August the Department submitted the SL1 and the draft SR to notify its intention to make this SR to introduce a right of appeal against specified departmental enforcement decisions on plant protection products, ensuring compliance with Article 7 of the Official Controls Regulation under the Windsor Framework.

The Committee noted on 10 September it had agreed to issue a Call for Views, which then received no responses.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Helen Thompson, Pesticides Projects Manager; and
- Bronagh Mallon, Senior Pesticides Policy Officer

The Committee noted that the Department has advised that there have been no changes to policy content since the SL1 was submitted to the Committee and that the SR has been laid before the Assembly under the negative resolution procedure and will come into operation on 30 November 2026.

The Committee heard it addresses a gap in the 2020 Regulations, reducing the risk of legal challenge and ensuring full implementation of the regulatory requirements.

The Committee also heard that it implements a minor technical amendment and does not provide for the extension or creation of offences or penalties and does not involve checks at points of entry,

A question and answer session followed.

The Committee heard that no consultation has been undertaken as the SR does not introduce further regulatory requirements but that the EU legislation it supports was consulted upon at EU level.

A Member wished their discontent with EU oversight of Northern Ireland affairs to be noted.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content to support the SR as drafted, subject to the ESR report.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 10:31am.

The Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association (NIMEA) representative joined the meeting at 10:31am

7. Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill – Oral Evidence Session with Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association (NIMEA).

This item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee considered correspondence from NI Environment Link (NIEL) relating to a query raised at the oral evidence session on 24 September regarding the EFS Higher Level agreements that have been in place across the eight tranches of EFS.

The Committee noted that NIEL states that the total number of agreements (farm businesses) was 1,098 and provided a constituency breakdown.

The Committee also noted that NIEL clarified that the proportion of Severely Disadvantaged Areas (SDA) land covered by EFS Higher Level agreements is just under 10%, rather than the 15% figure referred to during questions at the oral evidence session.

The following representative then briefed the Committee:

- Daryl McLaughlin - Chief Executive, NI Meat Exporters Association

The Committee heard that NIMEA is supportive of the Bill, but that funding should not be taken from the earmarked agriculture budget and there should be new funds for this scheme.

The Committee also heard that support for farmers in SDA is vital given the importance of small farms to the circular economy and that these farmers make a valuable contribution to local communities and deliver environmental benefits.

The Committee also heard that any new scheme should be covered by a review clause in the Bill.

A question and answer session followed, and topics of discussion included:

- The potential link between the removal of ANC payments and declining breeding ewe and suckler cow numbers;
- The possible merits of a single standard ANC payment rate;
- Concerns that funding will be diverted from existing agri-environmental scheme budgets;
- Support for the Sheep sector;
- Whether the previous ANC scheme was viewed as being Value for Money;
- The impact of an inflationary rise for an ANC scheme on funds available for other schemes;
- The economic impact of a lack of direct targeted support for farms in SDA and the knock on effect on the wider supply chain;
- The possible benefits of linking productivity to ANC payments

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a copy of the review of the previous ANC scheme.

The NIMEA representative left the meeting at 11:17am

The meeting was suspended at 11:18am

The meeting resumed at 11:19am

The Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association (NIAPA) representative joined the meeting at 11:19am

Áine Murphy MLA rejoined the meeting at 11:26am

Michelle McIlveen MLA left the meeting at 11:27am

8. Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill – Evidence Session with Northern Ireland Agricultural Producers' Association (NIAPA)

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following representative briefed the Committee:

- James Lowe, NIAPA Chairperson

The Committee heard that NIAPA is supportive of the Bill and there is a need for long-term support for SDA to maintain viable farm businesses, protect the sheep sector and ensure that environmentally important areas are protected, but that payments should be made from additional funding and not taken from the current agri-environment budget.

The Committee heard that for decades farmers in SDA have been put at a disadvantage due to redirection of funding away these areas.

The Committee also heard that current environmental farming schemes have had limited impact for SDAs, as many such farmers lack the cash flow for upfront payments needed to undertake the environmental actions to access this scheme.

A question and answer session followed, and topics of discussion included:

- Financial disadvantage faced by farmers in SDAs and the disproportionate impact on small farms;
- The low uptake of existing farming schemes in SDAs due to farmers lacking confidence to access them due to concerns at the capital outlay required;
- The possibility of linking environmental actions to payments; and
- Potential environmental benefits derived from providing financial support for farms in SDAs.

The Chair thanked the representative for his attendance.

The NIAPA representatives left the meeting at 11:47am

The meeting was suspended at 11:48am

The meeting resumed at 12:03pm

9. Hunting with Dogs Bill

The Committee noted the following items will be added to the evidence base for consideration:

- A submission relating to Rabbit Control with Dogs; and
- Additional written evidence submitted by the individual who sent the Committee copies of the book *Rural Wrongs: Hunting and the Unintended Consequences of Bad Law* by Charlie Pye-Smith.

The Committee considered correspondence from an individual, dated 23 September, regarding concerns at the extension of the Committee stage.

The Committee noted that it had addressed the matter of the extension to Committee Stage at the meeting on 24 September in response to several similar letters.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

10. SL1- The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 - noting stage

The Committee noted the purpose of the SR is to safeguard periwinkle stocks by prohibiting the taking of periwinkles by any means from Strangford Lough during the peak spawning period each year.

It is subject to the negative resolution procedure and made under powers in the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966. The Committee noted the Department introduced, and then revoked regulations in early 2026, to establish a closed season for periwinkle harvesting across Northern Ireland, after the Committee considered a prayer of annulment, following evidence from the Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF).

The Committee noted the Department is now proposing a more targeted closed season in Strangford Lough from January 2027 and has provided processors with 10 months' notice to allow time for preparation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note receipt of the SL1 and proposed statutory rule and that these will be published as part of the Committee's Call for Views on the proposal.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the policy detail of the SL1 at the meeting on 5 November, when will be briefed by Officials after the Committee has conducted and analysed responses to the Citizen Space survey.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a briefing from Officials is not necessary at this stage.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek the views from the NIMTF on the revised proposals, in the first instance, by completing the Citizen Space consultation, or by submitting separate written evidence to the Committee.

11. SL1 - The Digital Waste Tracking Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 - noting stage

The Committee noted that the purpose of the SR is to bring into operation the mandatory use of the Digital Waste Tracking (DWT) system to record waste data by any "legal entity" that is registered to receive waste in Northern Ireland.

It is subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure and made under powers conferred on DAERA by the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997. The Committee noted that Officials are scheduled to brief the Committee on the SR on 22 October.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note receipt of the SL1 and proposed statutory rule and that these will be published as part of the Committee's Call for Views on the proposal.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the policy detail of the SL1 at the meeting on 22 October, when it will be briefed by Officials after the Committee has conducted and analysed responses to the Citizen Space survey.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a briefing from Officials is not necessary at this stage.

12. Departmental Written Briefing - Designation of Quiet Areas

The Committee considered the written briefing detailing the outcome of the 8 week consultation and designation of Lagan Meadows as a Quiet Area.

The Committee noted Lagan Meadows, which is located within the Belfast City Council area, was chosen from a list of Candidate Quiet Areas to be subject to a public consultation.

The Committee noted 94% of the 45 consultation responses received supported the designation and that now the site has been designated, any noise issues experienced will be managed by Belfast City Council under its current legislative regimes.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the briefing.

13. Departmental Written Briefing - Lough Neagh Eel Fishery Transition Scheme

The Committee considered the written briefing regarding the three-year Lough Neagh Eel Fishery Transition Scheme to provide financial assistance to commercial eel fishers and eel hauliers following the closure of the yellow/brown eel fishery for an initial three-year period commencing in 2026.

The Committee noted the Transition Scheme will enable payments over three years equivalent to 50% of income foregone based on historical fishing activity during the 2022, 2023 and 2024 fishing seasons and will also encourage the exploration of more sustainable fishing methods; and provide opportunities for diversification where appropriate.

The Committee noted the total cost of the scheme including administration costs is expected to be approximately £0.7 million over three years and will be met from the Marine Environment and Fisheries Fund budget allocation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the briefing.

14. Correspondence

Agreed: The Committee agreed to action the following items of correspondence as detailed in the correspondence memo.

A memo dated 24 September, from Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee regarding Regulation (EU) 2026/1388 on plants obtained by certain new genomic techniques and their products.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 24 September, from Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny advising it has completed its enquiry into the EU Act regarding Regulation (EU) 2026/1739 as regards the strengthening of the position of farmers in the food supply chain.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 25 September from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy reminding all Assembly Statutory Committees to submit views regarding the Regional Balance Bill.

The Committee noted it previously considered this request and agreed a response at the meeting on 2 July which was forwarded to the Economy Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 25 September, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn – August (R5) Position.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo, dated 25 September, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding an invitation to a Ribbon Display Ceremony at Parliament Buildings on Monday 12 October at 11am as part of Baby Loss Week

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence from the Department dated 25 September regarding Publication of the Air Pollutant Inventories for England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland: 2005-2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence that the Committee has been copied into between Defra and the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee providing further updates in a range of matters within the scope of the Windsor Framework relating to:

- The private attestation requirements of the composite products exempted from official controls at border control posts.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Notification from The Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) of the launch of its investigation into management of NI's protected sites for nature.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

An invitation from Natural World Products (NWP) to visit its Glenside organic waste recycling facility for an on-site briefing regarding its operation and how the organics sector can play in addressing environmental challenges.

The Committee noted that NWP received the third and final £4m SULS Phase 2 contract in February 2026 and that the Committee has also considered a number of odour complaints in connection with NWP.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the invitation to the list of potential visits.

Correspondence the Committee has been copied into from an individual to the Department dated 23 September regarding the storage of solid recovered fuel at Warrenpoint Port.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Investing Activity Report for September 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

15. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to publish the Forward Work Programme.

16. Any Other Business

A Member raised the matter of the Department's issuing of letters of offer regarding the Farm Sustainability Improvement Scheme (FSIS) for which applications closed on 3 September.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on the timeline for the issuing of letters of offer for the FSIS.

A Member raised the matter of the preparedness of rural communities for the roll out of the Digital landline switchover expected in early 2027.

Members discussed requesting Openreach to brief the Committee on how to publicise the switchover and help prepare rural communities.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee team would explore the possibility of a briefing from Openreach.

17. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 6 October at 10:00am in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned 12:19pm

Signature:

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated