



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

28 May 2026

Meeting location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
Daniel McCrossan MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Áine Murphy MLA
Gareth Wilson MLA

Via Zoom: Aoife Finnegan MLA

In Attendance: Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk
Glenda Doherty, Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk
Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk
Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor
Kyle Lawlor, Clerical Officer

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:12am

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.

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.

Daniel McCrossan MLA declared an interest regarding his engagement with the Bonds Glen Environmental Group.

Michelle McIveen MLA joined the meeting at 10:16am

Daniel McCrossan MLA joined the meeting at 10:19am

Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting via Zoom at 10:27am

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to a draft copy of correspondence to Solace from the Committee in response to the correspondence from Solace, considered at the meeting on 21 May, regarding Solace's ongoing concerns on the Dilapidation Bill.

The Committee noted that the draft response outlines the Committee's extensive efforts to facilitate and respond to stakeholder input, and addresses some specific points raised by Solace.

Agreed: The Committee was content that the letter as drafted is issued to Solace.

The Chairperson referred to notification from the Clerk to the Committee for Education on two forthcoming Private Members Bills, on which Committee Stage work has begun:

- The Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill; and
- The Irish-Medium Education (Workforce Plan) Bill

The Committee noted the Education (Holiday Meal Payments) Bill is set against a backdrop of rising food insecurity in Northern Ireland and highlights the wide-ranging impacts of food insecurity on children's physical, mental, and educational outcomes.

The Committee further noted that food security is a theme it has covered in terms of the rising cost of fuel and fertiliser and the knock on effect on food prices particularly in rural areas.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the Committee for Education requesting that they scrutinise those matters raised.

The Committee considered The Irish-Medium Education (Workforce Plan) Bill and noted that the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 places a statutory obligation on public authorities to have due regard to rural needs in policy development and service delivery.

The Committee further noted that the Committee for Education may wish to examine whether the proposed expansion of provision has been appropriately rural-proofed, including its impact on access to education, rural inequalities, and the sustainability of rural communities.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the Committee for Education requesting that they scrutinise those matters raised.

The Chairperson referred to further correspondence, dated 18 May, from an Individual regarding allegation of pollution at the River Ridge Site on Craigmore Road. The Committee noted the considerable scrutiny it has previously undertaken on the matter of odour management including engagement with the NIEA and local councils.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence and a briefing paper from the RSPB on Anaerobic Digestion (AD) and biomethane. The Committee noted that the RSPB could not attend the Committee's AD event on 4 June and its offer to brief the Committee on the paper at a later date.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the RSPB to the list of potential future briefings.

The Chairperson referred to a note of the informal meeting on 26 May with members of the Bonds Glen Environmental Group to discuss what they have described as the destruction of Sperrin AONB and Special Area of Conservation.

The Committee noted that in March 2026 Derry City and Strabane District Council issued enforcement notices for the site owner to carry out restoration works at the site and that the Group advised this has not yet commenced.

The Committee noted the scrutiny it has undertaken on 26 February and on 19 March and that site inspections conducted in October 2025 by the Natural Environment Division, the Environmental Crime Unit and the Water Catchment Unit found no legislative breaches. Concerns were raised on the apparent difference of approach taken by NIEA and the local council.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the NIEA to seek clarification on the approach it has taken to the issues raised by the Group.

The Chairperson referred to Bill Office notification that the Hunting with Dogs Bill passed Second Stage on 26 May and that the Committee Stage commenced on 27 May with the last day of Committee Stage scheduled to be 2 September 2026.

The Committee agreed to return to the matter later in the meeting as the Bill proposer John Blair MLA left the meeting temporarily.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 21 May 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the concurrent meeting on 21 May 2026 with the Committees for Communities and Infrastructure regarding the Sustainable Places Programme.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 18 May, regarding queries raised on 7 May concerning The Farming with Nature (FwN) Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

The Committee noted in relation to permanent grassland sensitive areas and the possible effect on Areas with Natural Constraint, future strands of the FwN Package will provide support to protect and manage these areas including those located in areas with natural constraints.

The Committee also noted that three field margin actions are proposed for the Scheme in 2026 but as they are restricted to areas under arable production and not grazed by livestock, fencing will not be eligible for support.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee returned to an item of Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to Bill Office notification that the Hunting with Dogs Bill passed Second Stage on 26 May and that the Committee Stage commenced on 27 May with the last day of Committee Stage scheduled to be 2 September 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to return to the matter at the next Committee meeting to consider requesting a motion to extend the Committee Stage.

The Committee considered a memo, dated 22 May, from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy in response to a request for details of any work undertaken or planned by that Committee in relation to Maritime Fuel supply and costs.

The Committee noted the response states the Economy Committee has not completed any work in this regard and is unlikely to have capacity to do so in the current mandate.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered the response from the UK Chamber of Maritime Shipping, dated 22 May, regarding the Impacts of global economic events on the maritime industry.

The Committee noted its immediate concern is not physical disruption to fuel supply, but the entrenchment of higher prices, greater volatility, and wider cost pressures across transport and agricultural supply chains and will have direct implications for agri-food producers and operators.

The Committee also noted that the Chamber states rising energy costs, labour constraints, and tighter financing conditions are increasing pressures, as decarbonisation alternatives and infrastructure remain limited.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence and to keep a watching brief on the matter.

The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 26 May, regarding a request for an update on Ammonia Strategy and Nutrients Action Plan 2026-2029.

The Committee noted the Department states that the proposed two mandatory measures, the phased introduction of Low Emission Slurry Spreading Equipment and constraints on the use of granular urea fertilisers, unless they contain urease inhibitors, continue to be considered as part of the ongoing work of the NAP Stakeholder Task and Finish Group, which is nearing completion.

The Committee also noted that, following Ministerial consideration, the updated NAP proposals will be issued for an eight week consultation to inform the final version of the Ammonia Strategy, and the Plan will then be submitted to the Executive for approval.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:25am

6. Departmental Oral Evidence Session - SL1 - The Cattle Identification (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted that the Department submitted the SL1 and draft SR under the negative resolution procedure to the Committee on the 31 March and at its meeting on 16 April agreed to receive an oral briefing from DAERA officials and to issue a call for views using the Citizen Space platform, which received no responses.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Mr Neal Gartland, Director, Animal Health & Welfare Policy;
- Mr Christopher Andrews, Deputy Director, Animal Health & Welfare Policy;
and
- Mr Darrin Fullerton, Head of Livestock Identification and Germinal Products Policy

The Committee heard that the SR would introduce minor technical amendments to existing domestic cattle identification legislation, to enable the voluntary implementation of Electronic Identification (EID) of cattle in Northern Ireland.

The Committee heard that EID is expected to reduce tag-reading errors; simplify handling across the supply chain; reduce administrative work; improve transparency; support disease control; and compliment the Bovine Genetic project.

A question and answer session followed:

The Committee heard usage rests solely with the herd keeper and it is not expected there will be widespread uptake in smaller herds, as it is voluntary.

The Committee heard the use of EID tags is mandatory in the Republic of Ireland, and the introduction of EID in Northern Ireland will allow for integration, as both jurisdictions would utilise the same technology.

The Committee also heard that consideration will be given to making future EID usage mandatory but to date no decision has been made in that regard.

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 10:42am

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:43am

7. Departmental Oral Evidence Session SL1 - The Draft Air Quality (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted that the Department submitted the SL1 and draft SR under the negative resolution procedure to the Committee on the 16 April and on 30 April it agreed to receive an oral briefing from DAERA Officials and to issue a call for views using the Citizen Space platform, which received no responses.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Ms Amy Holmes, Head of Air and Environmental Quality Branch; and
- Mr Martin Blayney, Environmental Policy Advisor

The Committee heard that the SR would amend annual average limits, targets and objectives contained within existing legislation: the Air Quality Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 and the Air Quality Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 - to ensure these are more reflective of the concentrations of pollutants being monitored in Northern Ireland at present.

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

- Impact of air quality on health;
- The rationale for the 2028 target date and divergence from the rest of the UK;
- Inter-departmental co-operation to achieve targets;
- The role of local councils; and
- Increase in air quality monitoring sites

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 11:18am

The meeting was suspended at 11:18am

The meeting resumed at 11:31am

The RaISe Research Officer joined the meeting at 11:31am

8. Areas of Natural Constraint (Payments Bill) - Bill Research RaISe Briefing

The Committee noted that the Committee Stage started on 24 March and has been extended to 22 January 2027 and that going forward all Bill related papers will be issued in a separate Bill Pack for each Bill and updated each week.

The following RaISe Official briefed the Committee:

- Mark Allen – Research Officer

The Committee were briefed on the RaISe Bill research paper on the Areas with Natural Constraint (Payments) Bill including potential issues for Committee consideration.

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

- Similar schemes in Scotland and the Republic of Ireland;
- Environmental impacts;
- Eligibility for the scheme;
- Budgetary considerations and appropriate models of support;
- Definition of land designation; and
- Claimant eligibility.

The Chair thanked the RaISe Research Officer for his attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Bill proposer to request a response to queries raised in the RaISe paper.

The RaISe researcher left the meeting at 12:19pm

The Committee considered a draft stakeholder list for potential oral evidence sessions noting that those stakeholders will be emailed to encourage them to complete the Call for Views.

A Member requested an addition of a stakeholder representing a lowland area if an upland group was included.

Agreed: The Committee was content with the list as drafted, that the Clerk would prioritise oral evidence sessions from it and that Members would alert the Clerk if they wished to make any additions as the Committee Stage progresses.

The Committee noted that the Call for Views will close on 6 July and considered taking oral evidence before recess if the Committee has capacity, given the current work plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to commence oral evidence on 18 June.

Aine Murphy MLA left the meeting at 11:43am

9. Departmental Written Briefing – Consultation on the Introduction of Fixed Fees for Marine EIA Services (Screening and Scoping Opinions)

The Committee noted the embargo date on the document and that DAERA is the marine licensing authority for the Northern Ireland inshore region (0-12 nautical miles). It provides screening and scoping opinions to assist applicants' EIA preparation and assessment of sustainable developments which are typically large-scale, and complex with high capital values, including offshore renewables and major infrastructure projects.

The Committee noted in line with Managing Public Money the proposed fixed fees will enable cost recovery.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the briefing.

10. Correspondence

Agreed: The Committee considered the following items of correspondence and agreed to note:

- Correspondence from the Department, dated 18 May, regarding the Launch on 29 May of the 12 week Public Consultation on the Bathing Waters Policy Review for Northern Ireland.
- A Memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding Guidance to Departments in absence of a budget for 2026-27.
- The 66th ESR Report, dated 22 May, which contains no SRs of relevance to the Committee.
- Correspondence dated, 21 May, that the Committee has been copied into between Defra and the Chair of the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee regarding Regulation Regarding Certain Production, Labelling and Certification Rules and Certain Rules on Trade with Third Countries.
- Correspondence dated 22 May, from an individual regarding Small to Medium Anaerobic Digestion, Bioalgae and Rural Renewable Energy Opportunities in Northern Ireland.
- Notification of the Sustainable Energy Communities NI (SEC NI) Conference, on Monday 8th June in the Long Gallery.
- An invitation from the UFU to Arable NI 2026, which is an on farm knowledge transfer and arable industry networking event, on Wednesday 3 June.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

12. Any Other Business

None

13. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 4 June at 10:00am in Room 21 Parliament Buildings.

The Committee noted the Anaerobic Digestion Stakeholder event will take place from 5 to 7pm on 4 June in the Stormont Hotel.

The meeting was adjourned 12:24pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated