



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

29 May 2025

Parliament Buildings, Room 21

Present: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
Aoife Finnegan MLA
William Irwin MLA
Patsy McGlone MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA

Via Zoom: Áine Murphy MLA

Apologies: None

In Attendance: Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk
Mr Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk
Mr Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor
Ms Sarah Preece, Clerical Officer

The Meeting Opened in Public Session at 10:01am

1. Apologies

None

2. Declaration of Interests

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

William Irwin MLA declared an interest as a partner in a farm business.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chair referred to the online webinar in relation to the NAP consultation that was held on Wednesday 28th May. The Chair advised that the link was inoperable for a short period but was corrected and at least 180 attendees engaged online.

The Chair referred to the Written Ministerial Statement, dated 23 May, regarding the Rural Needs Monitoring Report 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024.

The Committee noted that the 7th Rural Needs Annual Monitoring has been published on the Department's website and details a number of policies with a positive impact that will help improve the lives of those who live and work in rural areas.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the statement.

The Chair referred to the oral Ministerial Statement dated 27 May regarding the British Irish Council Environment Work Sector Meeting that was held in Kew Gardens, London on Thursday 8 May.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the statement.

The Chair referred to correspondence from the Department dated 23 May regarding The Fair Dealing Obligations (Pigs) Regulations 2025.

The Committee noted that it received a written briefing on the Regulations at its meeting of 27 March and that this correspondence advised that the Regulations were made on 21 May and will begin to come into operation from August to apply to all new contracts and then to existing contracts from summer 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the update.

The Chair referred to the follow-up concurrent meeting with Infrastructure Committee Members at 9.30am on Tuesday 3rd June in the Senate Chamber, regarding the issues for landowners and farmers in connection with the A5 Western Transport Corridor.

The Committee noted that it would be briefed by DAERA Officials from the Natural Environment Division and the UFU.

The Chair suggested that the Committee could hear from individual farmers at a later date, if they wished, at an informal meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chair referred to an invitation from the RSPB to an event titled: 'Embedding Nature's Recovery in Offshore Development', on the 9th of June, in Parliament Buildings to discuss the steps needed to achieve nature positive developments at sea.

Agreed: The Committee noted the invitation.

4. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting on 22 May were agreed and signed by the Chair to be published.

Agreed: The Minutes were agreed.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a response from the Department regarding DAERA Final Budget 2025-26.

The Committee noted it considered this matter at its meeting of 15 May and sought further clarity on the £0.7m expenditure planned for Future Rural Policy 2025-26. The response stated that interim proposals are being developed to address potential gaps as DAERA transitions to a Future Rural Policy. The £0.7m set aside is to provide funding certainty in 2025-26 and will be kept under review at each Monitoring Round.

The Chair advised that he will be speaking on behalf of the Committee on 3rd June regarding the Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Main Estimates 2025-26.

Agreed. The Committee agreed to note the response.

The OEP representatives joined the meeting at 10.02am

6. Oral briefing from The Office for Environmental Protection (OEP)

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Dame Glenys Stacey, Chair
- Natalie Prosser, Chief Executive Officer
- Professor Robbie McDonald, Chief Insights Officer;
- Dr Donnacha Doody, Head of Analysis for Northern Ireland
- John McCartney, Principle Monitoring Environmental Law Officer

The Committee heard a short introductory briefing from the OEP regarding its role in holding the government to account regarding its environmental commitments. The Committee heard that common threads are ineffective implementation of environmental laws, weak governance, and delays in putting in place vital plans and pollution due to excess nutrients.

The Committee was then briefed on two OEP Reports - A Review of Implementation of The Water Framework Directive Regulations and River Basin Management

Planning in Northern Ireland Report (September 2024) and the OEP Bathing Waters Report (November 2024).

The committee heard that the Water Framework Directive (WFD) NI Regulations are broadly sound but are not being properly implemented and the OEP identified eight implementation issues and made 16 recommendations for action which DAERA has accepted in principle.

The Committee heard that the River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) is long overdue and that the OEP recommended that the draft it had seen in 2021 needed to be strengthened and now it needs implemented with urgency.

The Committee heard that the Bathing Waters Report found the current Bathing Waters Regulations are generally sound but need to be updated to reflect changes to recreational use of water that now includes many different year-round activities, such as paddleboarding and surfing.

The Committee heard that despite improvements in bathing water quality in recent years NI is still one of the lower performers in Europe and is below the EU average.

The Committee hear the OEP have welcomed DAERA's commitment to reviewing the current regime and have acted on a number of points including identifying seven new bathing waters.

There then followed a question and answer session on these two reports.

Responses by the OEP to Committee queries included the need for more robust cross-departmental actions, the scale of the surplus nutrients going into the environment, the potential for pollution risk forecasting, the water quality stocktake, which has identified new and emerging pollutants and the need for resources and political will to tackle the issues.

The Committee were then briefed on the Drivers and Pressures on Nature Report (October 2024) and the Protected Sites Report (April 2025).

The Committee heard the Drivers and Pressures on Nature Report found pressures include the impacts of agriculture, wastewater management, and resource extraction.

The Committee also heard that agri-food industry is unsustainable in terms of pressures on the natural environment and that prompt and decisive action is essential.

The Committee heard the Protected Sites Report found that Northern Ireland is lagging behind the rest of the UK, Ireland and Europe with no new sites designated since 2018 and that the condition of protected sites is deteriorating.

The Committee heard that this is due to ineffective governance, low levels of transparency and accountability, and resourcing.

The Committee heard the report made 14 recommendations including introducing targets to increase the coverage of protected sites, restoring them and advice and support to be available to all owners of protected sites.

There then followed a question and answer session on these two reports.

The Committee heard that the crisis at Lough Neagh is considered a red flag and that it will become a common experience across Northern Ireland if nutrient pollution is not addressed.

Some Members expressed concern that farming industry were being viewed as the primary cause for pollution of waterways, while other sources are overlooked. The OEP stated that they wish to strike a balance and not pursue one specific industry and look at other sources of pollution in their investigations.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to enquire how it is handling the ‘high risk’ and ‘very high risk’ new and emerging pollutants as detailed in A Review of Implementation of The Water Framework Directive Regulations and River Basin Management Planning in Northern Ireland Report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask how many Protected Sites are publicly owned or under the management of the public sector.

The OEP representatives left the meeting at 12:05pm

The meeting was suspended at 12:06pm

The meeting resumed at 12:18 pm

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 12:19pm

7. SL1 The Farming with Nature Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The following DAERA Officials briefed the Committee:

- Zita Hale, Deputy Director of Agricultural Policy Division;
- Manus McHenry, Deputy Director of Agricultural Policy Division; and
- Ms Devina Park, Head of Farming with Nature Transition Policy Branch.

The Committee heard that the Department intends to make a Statutory Rule to provide it with the legal powers to implement the Farming with Nature Transition Scheme, providing a package of support for farmers to increase the extent of habitats across farmed land in Northern Ireland.

The Scheme provides for payments to be made by DAERA to eligible farm businesses in relation to undertaking specific environmental actions on eligible farmed land.

The Committee heard that The SR will be laid before the Assembly under the negative resolution procedure and subject to Executive approval it is anticipated that it will come into operation in June.

The Committee heard that the aim is to simplify the process making it less prescriptive with an emphasis on highlighting environmental benefits.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard that there will be assistance and support available to farmers wishing to make applications. In response to a concern that penalties for minor infringements appear harsh, Officials advised that there will be tolerances and flexibility built into the system help alleviate this issue.

The Chair thanked Officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Department proceeds to make the SR, and the Committee will consider it and the ESR Report in due course.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 12:54pm

8. Departmental Written Briefing - Update on the Sustainable Utilisation of Livestock Slurry Phase 2

The Committee considered the briefing providing an update on the progress of the Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) on the Sustainable Utilisation of Livestock Slurry (SULS) Phase 2 Programme, which aims to provide the evidence to support policy and behavioural change to address the issue relating to the management of nutrients.

The Committee noted following the completion of SULS Phase 1 in August 2023, Phase 2 was launched in June 2024 and is due to complete in September 2027 with the potential for an extension of 1 year. Two contracts were signed in the third quarter of 2024 and a third contract is in discussion.

The Committee noted the project has had positive feedback from the industry and, by the end of the project, it aims to remove at least 1,000 tonnes per year of phosphorus.

The Committee noted that a potential visit to Blackiston Houston Estates to see the SULS project in action is on the Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that to note the written briefing.

9. Departmental Written Briefing - Lucy's Law - consideration of consultation document prior to publication

The Committee considered the briefing paper and noted that the Department intends to launch a 12 week public consultation from 2 June on proposals to introduce a registration scheme for anyone who intends to sell or supply puppies and kittens (under six months old), including a ban on third-party sales and supplies of these animals in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the written briefing.

10 - Departmental Written Briefing - Update on the outcomes of the Just Transition public consultation

The Committee considered the briefing paper that included a summary of the responses received to the consultation and the Consultation on the Establishment of a Just Transition Commission.

The Committee noted there was strong support from respondents for DAERA's proposals on the type of public body the Commission should be, with the majority of respondents agreeing that the Commission should be an Advisory Non-Departmental Public Body, comprising members who represent a wide range of sectors.

The Committee noted that DAERA will provide further evidence to the Committee in due course on the proposed policy content of the draft Regulations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the written briefing.

11. Correspondence.

The Committee considered a response, dated 22 May, from the DAERA to the Clerk to the Committee for Infrastructure regarding Infrastructure Committee queries raised in relation to Wastewater Capacity in Northern Ireland: Compliance and Environmental Matters.

The Committee noted that it last considered Wastewater Capacity at its meeting on 27 February when it was provided with a copy of a written briefing from NIEA to the Committee for Infrastructure.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance dated 22 May regarding the 2025-26 June Monitoring Commissioning letter.

The Committee noted that the memo states the Department of Finance has formally commissioned returns from all departments in respect of the June Monitoring Round to be submitted by Thursday 5 June.

The Committee noted that it will be briefed by Officials on the June Monitoring Round at its meeting on 5 June.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the memo.

The Committee considered the memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance, dated 22 May, regarding Budget Sustainability – 5-year Departmental Plans Guidance. The Committee for Finance has provided the detailed guidance given to departments to facilitate the production of their five-year business plans on which work has formally been commissioned.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the memo.

The Committee considered the 40th Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

The Committee noted the report does not refer to any SRs of relevance to the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the Report.

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance, dated 23 May, regarding the Deaths, Still-Births and Baby Loss Bill.

The Committee noted that the Committee for Finance is seeking the views of all Assembly Statutory Committees by 20th June.

The Committee noted that the Bill represents a considered update to Northern Ireland's civil registration framework and an issue could be the readiness and consistency of the new digital registration system across rural councils.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to SOLACE to ask if any issues are envisaged for rural councils regarding the Bill.

The Committee considered correspondence from Andy McMurray MLA regarding a written briefing from the Clean Water Sports Alliance NI. The Committee noted that the briefing was also provided to the Infrastructure Committee

The Committee noted that the Alliance believe that water sports are vital for community health and economic benefits in Northern Ireland but face significant challenges due to poor water quality and is advocating for improved water quality management and infrastructure.

Agreed: the Committee agreed to consider a potential joint informal meeting with the Committee for Infrastructure and invite Clean Water Sports Alliance NI to provide a briefing.

The Committee considered the Investment Strategy Northern Ireland Delivery Tracking System - investing activity report, DAERA, dated 25 May.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the report.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

13. Any Other Business

Michelle McIlveen MLA highlighted the publication of an open letter from representatives of the Northern Ireland agri food sector to the Minister regarding their concerns in relation to the NAP consultation.

14. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on Thursday 5th June at 10.00am in **Parliament Buildings, Room 21**

The meeting was adjourned at 1:03pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated