



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Report on Legislative Consent Memorandum – Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill (UK Government)

Ordered to be printed 27 June 2025

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Contents

Powers and Membership 3

Background..... 6

Committee Consideration of Legislative Consent Memorandum 8

Conclusion 17

Links to Appendices..... 19

 Appendix 1: Memoranda and Papers from the Department for Agriculture,
 Environment and Rural Affairs..... 19

 Appendix 2: Minutes of Proceedings 19

 Appendix 3: Minutes of Evidence 19

 Appendix 4: Written submissions..... 19

Powers and Membership

Powers

The Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs is a Statutory Departmental Committee established in accordance with paragraphs 8 and 9 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement and under Assembly Standing Order No 48. The Committee has a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role with respect to the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs and has a role in the initiation of legislation. The Committee has power to:

- Consider and advise on Departmental budgets and Annual Plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- Approve relevant secondary legislation and take the Committee Stage of relevant primary legislation;
- Call for persons and papers;
- Initiate inquiries and make reports; and
- Consider and advise on matters brought to the Committee by the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs.

Membership

The Committee has nine members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

- 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
- Áine Murphy MLA

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report

DAERA: Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

DEFRA: Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

LCM: Legislative Consent Memorandum (or Motion)

NILGA: Northern Ireland Local Government Association

PMB: Private Member's Bill

PPS: Public Prosecution Service

Solace: Society of Local Authority Chief Executives

USPCA: Ulster Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

Background

1. The Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill (a Westminster Private Members' Bill (PMB)) makes provision to restrict the commercial importation and non-commercial movement of dogs, cats, and ferrets into the United Kingdom from third countries on grounds of animal welfare.
2. The PMB was introduced at Westminster on 16 October 2024 and the Committee Stage there is currently ongoing with Report Stage due to be completed on 4 July 2025.
3. The PMB does not extend to Northern Ireland and, as it covers devolved matters, the inclusion of these provisions for Northern Ireland will require approval of a Legislative Consent Motion in the Assembly (Standing Order 42A).
4. The UK Government is now formally supporting this PMB, which will create enabling powers to prohibit the importation of cats and dogs that are mutilated or heavily pregnant to Great Britain. The PMB will not ban the import of animals itself, but it will set out the conditions, specify the offences and enable secondary legislation to be made, which will prohibit these animals from being brought to the UK.
5. The PMB seeks to address the current issue of commercial imports being disguised as non-commercial movements by amending the rules that govern the non-commercial movement of dogs, cats, and ferrets into Great Britain from third countries.
6. The PMB will confer an enabling power on all relevant national authorities in the UK to make regulations on importing dogs, cats, and ferrets, which promotes the welfare of those animals. This provision would enable the making of secondary legislation in the Assembly to prohibit the importation cats and dogs which have been subject to procedures in the country of origin, which interfere

with sensitive tissues or bone structures. This would, for example, cover imports of dogs with cropped ears or cats that have been declawed.

7. It is illegal to perform these types of procedures in Northern Ireland, under Section 5 of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011. It is also an offence to take an animal outside of Northern Ireland and have these procedures performed elsewhere before and then bring that animal back to Northern Ireland. However, a person is not prohibited from bringing a dog or cat with mutilations, which they have acquired, to Northern Ireland from a country where these procedures are still deemed acceptable or permissible.
8. The Legislative Consent Memorandum (LCM) was laid before the Assembly by the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs under Standing Order 42A (2) on 12 June 2025.

Committee Consideration of Legislative Consent Memorandum

Committee Meeting – 12 June 2025

9. At its meeting on 12 June, the Committee had before it written correspondence from the Department, dated 3 June, seeking the Committee's views on tabling a Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) concerning the Government-backed Private Member's Bill - Animal Welfare (Import of Cats, Dogs and Ferrets).
10. As the provision would relate to a devolved matter, it would require an LCM to be agreed by the Assembly and the views of the Committee were sought, in principle, in the correspondence on the tabling of such a motion.
11. The Committee noted that under the Memorandum of Understanding between central government and the devolved administrations, where Parliament intends to legislate on a transferred matter, it is normal practice for the relevant GB Minister to seek the agreement of the devolved administration.
12. The Committee also noted that it is normal practice for an LCM to be provided on Bills in advance of them reaching Report stage in the House of Commons. This is the last stage at which amendments can be made before a Bill would progress to the House of Lords. The Bill is currently at Committee Stage, with Report Stage set to be completed on 4 July 2025.
13. The Committee also noted that normally it would have up to 15 days to report on an LCM. However, in order to move the Motion itself on the last sitting day of the Assembly (1 July) and adhere to Standing Orders, the Department requested that the Committee expedite their reporting period and report by 20 June.
14. The Committee considered the Department's rationale for the request – that the Bill is a government-backed PMB, which means there is no mechanism to amend this piece of draft legislation once it leaves the House of Commons and

moves to the House of Lords. Westminster timescales mean the Bill will reach report stage and must move to the Lord's on 4 July thereby leaving little time to fulfil the scrutiny process in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

15. The Committee was concerned that the Department advised that it was not in a position to provide a briefing to the Committee as expected at its next meeting on 19 June. Members expressed concern that, although supportive of the Bill in principle on animal welfare grounds, it would not be in a position to report on the LCM without the Department providing a briefing to allow exploration of any potential issues.
16. The Committee agreed to write to the Department to advise if it wished the Committee to expedite its report on the LCM it required a formal briefing from Officials, either in person or remotely, to allow it to complete its due diligence' however this was unlikely to be by 20 June.
17. The Committee was then pleased to be informed, after its meeting on 12 June, that the Department would provide an oral briefing by Zoom at the Committee meeting on 19 June.
18. It was agreed that Committee staff, due to the limited time available, should directly contact an agreed seven main stakeholders for their comments on the PMB:
 - Kennel Club;
 - Dogs Trust;
 - Cats Protection League;
 - A Ferret Rescue Centre;
 - USPCA;
 - SOLACE; and
 - NILGA.

Committee Meeting – 19 June 2025

19. At its meeting on 19 June 2025, the Committee noted correspondence from the Department advising that the LCM on The Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) PMB was laid before the Assembly on 12 June under Standing Order 42A (2).
20. The Committee also had before it a copy of The Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) PMB and a copy of the Explanatory Notes to the Bill provided by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA).
21. The Committee received an oral briefing by Zoom from DAERA Officials on the PMB and the need for the LCM. The Officials accepted that such an issue would normally be dealt with through an Assembly Bill but that the LCM is the most timely and proportionate way forward.
22. The Officials also apologised to the Committee for the lateness in bringing the LCM to its attention and with hindsight should have brought the proposals to Committee at the same time as they went to the Executive. The Committee was pleased to hear that the Department will review the process to learn lessons to avoid the scenario happening again.
23. The Committee heard that the PMB contains eight clauses, five of which apply to Northern Ireland. It covers two topics:
 - the non-commercial movement of cats, dogs and ferrets between Great Britain and countries beyond the United Kingdom; and
 - the welfare of dogs, cats and ferrets that are brought into any part of the UK, including Northern Ireland, from countries beyond the UK. **It is only the welfare element of the Bill that will apply to Northern Ireland.**
24. It was noted that although only containing a limited number of provisions, if a Northern Ireland-specific Primary Bill was to be made, that it would need to

complete all the necessary legislative stages and it could be at least one or two years before the powers would be made. Furthermore, as the provisions are relatively minor and technical and it would be more efficient to deal with them in the ready-made vehicle of a Westminster Bill.

25. The Committee noted that the PMB will amend the retained European Union (EU) Law version of Regulation (EU) No 576/2013 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 12 June 2013, on the non-commercial movement of pet animals and reduce the number of pets that can enter Great Britain from five to three.
26. The Committee also noted it will also contain an enabling power to permit England, Scotland and Wales to make Regulations that would restrict the importation of cats and dogs, which are below the age of 6 months, or more than 42 days pregnant or mutilated.
27. Officials also stated that the PMB will confer a power on all relevant national authorities in the UK to make regulations on importing cats, dogs, or ferrets, which promotes the welfare of those animals.
28. For Northern Ireland, as this is a devolved matter, this power will rest with the Department. This is a wide-ranging power which would enable the making of secondary legislation in the Assembly to prohibit the importation cats and dogs which have been mutilated (e.g. ears cropped or declawed).
29. The Committee noted that it is already illegal under Section 5 of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 to conduct a procedure which interferes with the bone structure or sensitive tissue of an animal, where that act takes place in Northern Ireland. It is also an offence to take an animal outside of Northern Ireland and have these procedures performed elsewhere, before subsequently bringing that animal back here.
30. The Committee heard that by DAERA gaining powers to ban the import of dogs and cats with mutilations would close off legal loopholes around ear-cropping or other mutilations, where people buy those animals directly.

31. The Officials highlighted that the PMB does not provide powers to Northern Ireland to introduce measures to prohibit travel of animals under 6 months old, as it is considered that any such measures could be contrary to the EU Pets Regulation (EU) 576/2013, which applies to Northern Ireland as it is contained within Annex 2 to the Windsor Framework.
32. The Committee noted the PMB includes powers to establish criminal offences in relation to the importation of cats and dogs which breach any conditions imposed with the offence punishable with a fine or with a term of imprisonment or a fine (or both). The maximum penalty that will apply in Northern Ireland, if an offence is sent to Crown Court is imprisonment for a term not exceeding five years, or a fine, or both.
33. The Committee was pleased to note that the LCM will provide powers to implement restrictions later, by way of secondary legislation. Therefore any policy proposal would be open to public consultation and legislation would be subject the full scrutiny of the Assembly.
34. In the question and answer session with the Officials several matters were discussed as follows.
35. A Member expressed concern regarding the elements of the Bill that do not extend to Northern Ireland, including the six-months age limit; the ability to restrict import of animals that are pregnant; and the reduction of the number of animals acceptable in a personal import from five to three.
36. Officials stated in response that Northern Ireland does not have a particular problem around such personal imports of trying to circumvent rules by bringing in pregnant animals. The provisions brought forward by DEFRA are primarily to tackle the issue that it encounters in the Southeast of England, where traffickers are pretending that consignments of pups are their personal imports.
37. Officials outlined the typical trafficking scenarios seen in Northern Ireland with indigenous illegal breeders moving animals in van loads, not threes and fives,

through Larne and Belfast to the bigger, more lucrative market in Great Britain or those coming across from the Republic of Ireland into Northern Ireland.

38. In response to a Member's query about sentencing, Officials advised that the PPS believe that sentencing within the Welfare of Animals Act is robust enough but that engagement with the PPS and the Department of Justice is ongoing.
39. The Committee heard that if legislation was not put in place, the Minister had concerns that Northern Ireland might be used as a staging post to bring animals into other jurisdictions, bypassing the legislation that has been brought in in the Republic of Ireland and will be brought in in England, Scotland and Wales.
40. A Member raised concerns that as Clauses 4, 5 and 6 do not extend to Northern Ireland there would be less stringent requirements than the rest of the UK. In response, the Officials stated the patterns of movements or aspects of puppy smuggling experienced in Northern Ireland would not have been solved by applying the legislation or the amendments being brought forward in England, which deal with scenarios that are specific to Southeast of England and issues encountered at the Channel ports.
41. A Member put a potential scenario to Officials that if a smuggler wanted to continue that practice, they could legitimately do it from France to the Republic of Ireland. Then, with a change of ownership to Northern Ireland because those rules do not apply from Northern Ireland to Great Britain, there would be no restriction on that internal movement, thereby circumventing the law.
42. In response, the Official stated that there are other protections in the welfare during transport legislation on transporting animals in their final stages of gestation which would counter that scenario.
43. A Member also pointed out that it would be seen as good animal welfare to ban the sale of pregnant dogs and queried why DAERA would not recommend extending that provision to Northern Ireland. The Official responded that this legislation is generally to tackle direct imports from Eastern Europe, which is an

issue in the Southeast of England and that Northern Ireland does not necessarily see movements and direct imports of pregnant animals.

44. A further concern was raised that smugglers, with no interest in animal welfare, could find another route via Northern Ireland posing few logistical difficulties and enabling them to transport a dog ‘almost legally’ as they can transfer ownership to Northern Ireland.
45. In response, the Official advised that DAERA would follow up on this concern and contact would be made with colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to ascertain the checks that they have on pregnant dogs and other animals that come into the Republic of Ireland from continental Europe.
46. The Committee agreed that, in principle, it had no objection to the LCM moving forward. It was agreed that its meeting of the 26 June would be focused on
 - i. consideration of any responses from stakeholders; and
 - ii. consideration of a draft Committee LCM Report.

Position in Other Jurisdictions

47. The Department’s briefing on 19 June 2025 also outlined the positions in other jurisdictions. The Bill will confer enabling powers on England, Scotland, and Wales to make secondary legislation that would restrict the importation of cats and dogs, which are below the age of 6 months, or more than 42 days pregnant or mutilated.
48. The Republic of Ireland (RoI) Government banned the import of dogs with cropped ears in September 2023, via the Ear-Cropping of Dogs Regulations 2023. It is also illegal to crop a dog’s ears in the RoI under the Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013.
49. In 2023, the European Commission published a draft regulation on the welfare of cats and dogs and their traceability. Article 15 of that draft regulation, if

adopted, will prohibit mutilations, including ear cropping, tail docking, partial or complete digit amputation, and resection of vocal cords or folds, unless these procedures are performed by veterinarian with the sole purpose of improving the health of a dog or cat.

Committee Meeting – 26th June 2025

50. At its meeting on 26 June 2025, the Committee noted that it had received responses from the Dogs Trust and Solace. Links to the full responses can be found in the Appendices.
51. **The Committee were pleased to note that the Dogs Trust** welcomes the PMB and is pleased that the Committee is considering an LCM to bring this legislation into force in Northern Ireland.
52. The Dog's Trust is broadly supportive of the legislative proposals, as they seek to address several concerns on the issue of puppy smuggling, which have emerged and persisted following changes to the Pet Travel Scheme (PETS) in 2012, intended for use by people taking their pets on holiday.
53. They welcomed the prohibition on the importation of animals under six months of age as due to poor welfare conditions and / or have not received the appropriate vaccinations for travel and may have falsified documentation.
54. The prohibition of importation of animals more than 42 days pregnant was also welcomed but disappointed was expressed that the PMB does not include a complete ban on the import of heavily pregnant dogs under commercial legislation and would welcome the expansion of the PMB to include this.
55. Dogs Trust welcome the creation of criminal offences related to non-compliance with the proposed regulations stating it has long called for the introduction of commensurate penalties for those caught smuggling / illegally importing puppies.

56. However, it expressed concerned that, regarding movement of animals and cross-border activity, without routine checks between Great Britain and Northern Ireland on the non-commercial movement of companion animals as agreed under the Windsor Framework, opportunities for detection and enforcement may be limited.
57. **The Committee were pleased to note that Solace** welcomes the Bill particularly in relation to preventing the import of animals that have been subjected to procedures in their country of origin, which interfere with sensitive tissue or bone structures.
58. Solace stated that the PMB would strengthen the current enforcement framework under Section 5 of the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, enabling further action against individuals who import animals that have undergone such mutilations in jurisdictions where these practices are still permitted.
59. Solace stated, however, that whilst councils look forward to engaging with DAERA regarding future consultative proposals to implement the Bill, a concern was raised in relation to the additional enforcement responsibilities which are being transferred to councils, including the allocation of adequate resources to support this work.
60. The Committee then considered its position on the LCM and its draft LCM report in a private session.
61. The Committee returned to public session and the Committee's position was stated for the record. The Committee agreed the draft Report, pending the addition of its conclusions, and was content for the Clerk to complete that section and include the Committee's position. It was content to issue the report on the LCM outlining the scrutiny it had completed in a tight timescale of two weeks – in order to issue its report on 27 June 2025 in advance of the plenary debate on 1 July.

62. The Committee was not content to take a definitive position on the LCM as it felt it had not been given sufficient time to scrutinise the LCM and particularly the issues raised by the Dogs Trust and Solace.
63. The Committee itself had raised concerns at its meeting on 19 June regarding smugglers, with no interest in animal welfare, potentially finding another route via Northern Ireland that would pose few logistical difficulties and enabling them to transport a dog 'almost legally' as they can transfer ownership to Northern Ireland. DAERA has still to follow up on this concern.
64. In considering the LCM the Committee raised several other matters of concern that they wished to highlight in the Conclusion.

Conclusion

65. At its meeting on 26 June 2025, the Committee agreed that it was not able to take a position on the Legislative Consent Motion on The Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill, for the reasons already highlighted above, including insufficient scrutiny time on several matters of concern.
66. The Committee recognised the positive arguments in this specific case for an LCM to introduce this widely supported legislation via the Westminster PMB, However, the general point was made by the Committee that devolved matters should be legislated for by primary legislation made by the Northern Ireland Assembly as far as possible.
67. Regarding the aspects of the PMB that are unable to be included in the LCM due to matters of the Windsor Framework, it requests that the Minister seeks to cover Northern Ireland in that regard through legislation or other means as soon as is practicable.
68. The Committee wished to highlight the concerns raised by Members regarding movement and sales of very young and pregnant animals, potential loopholes for smugglers and the matters highlighted by the Dogs Trust regarding movement of animals and cross-border activity on the non-commercial

movement of companion animals as agreed under the Windsor Framework, opportunities for detection and enforcement may be limited.

69. The Committee also generally noted the short timeframe for scrutiny of LCMs and the limited chance of making any amendments. With this LCM, Members highlighted the unusually tight timeline for the scrutiny of the LCM as the Bill is currently at Committee Stage, with Report Stage set to be completed on 4 July 2025.
70. However, the Committee welcomed the apology on the timescales from DAERA on 19 June 2025 and looks forward to earlier engagement on any future LCMs.

Links to Appendices

[Appendix 1: Memoranda and Papers from the Department for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs](#)

View Memoranda and Papers supplied to the Committee by the Department

[Appendix 2: Minutes of Proceedings](#)

View Minutes of Proceedings of Committee meetings related to the report

[Appendix 3: Minutes of Evidence](#)

View Minutes of Evidence from evidence sessions related to the report

[Appendix 4: Written submissions](#)

View written submissions received in relation to the report

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Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

Dr Janice Thompson (Clerk to the Committee)

Northern Ireland Assembly

Parliament Buildings

Ballymiscaw

Stormont

Belfast BT4 3XX

Telephone: 028 905 21369

Email: Committee.AgriEnvRural@niassembly.gov.uk

X (Twitter): @NIAAgriEnvRA