



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

7 May 2026

Meeting location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Tom Buchanan MLA
Aoife Finnegan MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Gareth Wilson MLA

Via Zoom: John Blair MLA
Daniel McCrossan MLA
Áine Murphy MLA

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

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:19am

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.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to a memo from the Clerk to the Chairpersons' Liaison Group regarding Updated Guidance for Witnesses appearing before Assembly; and The Role of Committee Chairpersons.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 23 April, from an individual, in a follow up to previous correspondence it considered on 12 March, regarding asbestos contamination at the former Ulster Weavers site on Maldon / Meridi Street.

The Committee noted it raised a wider matter of environmental health and agreed to write to both the Minister and Belfast City Council (BCC) and noted it considered the Minister's response on 16 April.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note and consider the BCC response and wider issues at Matters Arising.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 1 May, from NI Water thanking the Committee for the opportunity to present its emerging findings on its contribution to the nutrient loading in Lough Neagh at the concurrent meeting on 21 April.

The Committee noted NI Water reiterates its invitation to the Committee to visit one of its wastewater treatment works or water processing plants.

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

The Chairperson referred to a concurrent meeting with the Committee for Communities and the Committee for Infrastructure to discuss the Sustainable Places Programme to be held at 10am on Thursday 21 May, before the usual Committee AERA Committee meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 30 April 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered the response from the Minister, dated 29 April, regarding ongoing Staffing Vacancies on Departmental Operations.

The Committee noted the Department states that that there is now supply available to fill some of DAERA's most critical grades, including specialist professional and technical grades in science and fisheries, with other competitions underway for veterinary staff and vacancies in planning functions are being treated as priority.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 27 April, regarding the Fisheries and Water Environment Bill in response to the request for clarification on the intention regarding aquaculture licenses and the definition of Aquaculture.

The Committee noted the response provided the rationale not to remove the Fish Culture Licence (FCL) and Aquaculture will be clearly defined in the Bill to allow all non-fish/shellfish aquaculture operations (e.g. seaweed) to be licensed.

The Committee also noted the Department also intends to produce a dedicated Aquaculture Policy providing clarity and direction for future sustainable development of both inland and marine sub-sectors.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered the response from the Belfast City Council (BCC), dated 30 April, regarding the measures taken regarding asbestos contamination at the former Ulster Weavers site on Maldon/Meridi Street.

The Committee noted the actions taken by BCC since it became aware of issues at the site in 2010 which have included the issuing of Notices regarding the discovery of asbestos on the site in 2011 and works in default undertaken by BCC to remove asbestos containing materials, demolish unsafe buildings and secure the site.

The Committee also noted BCC states it has no powers to regulate or remediate as it is designated as a brown field site, and the landowner has responsibility for full and final remediation. Also, that monitoring, enforcement, and waste removal has been the responsibility of the Department as the statutory waste regulator under the Water and Contaminated Land order (Northern Ireland)1997.

A concern was raised that the BCC may not be exercising the full powers available to them and that there seemed to have been lack of action from BCC and the NIEA.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered the draft adverts for its Call for Evidence on the Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed for the team to publish the adverts as drafted once the Citizen Space Survey is live.

The Committee considered a draft note of the Informal Round Table Discussion held with the Committee for the Economy on Tuesday 5 May in relation to issues of the cost, supply and storage of fuel and fertiliser.

The Committee noted that the Clerk will consult with the Economy Clerk going forward on other actions mentioned during the meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to raise the issues discussed at the informal discussion with the EFRA Committee at its informal meeting at the Balmoral Show on 14 May.

The Committee noted the initial informal meeting with the OEP's Chief Scientist, Professor Robbie McDonald, to discuss the OEP report on the Nutrient Action Programme Regulations (2019) Northern Ireland (via MS Teams) on 5 May had to be postponed due to a number of consecutive votes in the Chamber.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to hold the meeting on Tuesday 12 May at 2pm.

John Blair MLA joined the meeting via video link at 10:28am

6. Dilapidation Bill - Informal Decision Making (Clause by Clause)

The Chairperson stated that the Committee will finalise its informal deliberations on its agreement or otherwise with each Clause and any proposed amendments in closed session with the Assembly Bill Office Official.

The Committee agreed to go into Closed session and then return to public session to put any outstanding queries to the DAERA Bill Officials.

The meeting went into closed session at 10:30am

The meeting resumed in public session at 11:13am

Michelle McIlveen MLA left the meeting at 11:13am

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11:13am

7. Dilapidation Bill – Formal Clause by Clause.

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The following Officials were in attendance:

- Simon Webb – DAERA Bill Team and;
- Mark Allison – DAERA Bill Team.

The Chair questioned the Officials regarding the Department’s proposed new Clause 28A - an amendment to the Bill for a Review and Reporting Clause following the example in Section 228 of the Planning Act (Northern Ireland) 2011.

The Chair advised the Committee that it had indicated in the closed session that it was now ready to undertake its formal Clause by Clause Consideration of the Dilapidation Bill.

Clause 1 - Maintenance notice

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 1 as drafted.

Clause 2 – Appeal against maintenance notice

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 2 as drafted subject to the proposed Departmental amendment

Clause 3 – Breach of Maintenance Notice

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 3 as drafted.

Clause 4 – Dilapidation Notice

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 4 as drafted subject to the proposed Departmental amendment.

Clause 5 – Appeal against dilapidation notice

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 5 as drafted.

Clause 6 – Breach of dilapidation notice

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 6 as drafted.

Clause 7 – Dangerous structure notice

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 7 as drafted subject to the proposed Departmental amendment.

Clause 8 – Appeal against dangerous structure notice

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 8 as drafted.

Clause 9 – Breach of dangerous structure notice

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 9 as drafted.

Clause 10 – Emergency action

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 10 as drafted.

Clause 11 – Defective Premises Notice

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 11 as drafted subject to the 16 proposed Departmental amendments

Clause 12 – Costs of district council

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 12 as drafted subject to the two proposed Departmental amendments.

Clause 13 – Charge on Land

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 13 as drafted.

Clause 14 - Costs of Interested Persons

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 14 as drafted.

Clause 15 – Obstruction by Occupier (etc.)

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 15 as drafted.

Clause 16 – Information

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 16 as drafted subject to the proposed Departmental amendment.

Clause 17 – Consultation with Planning Department

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 17 as drafted subject to the two proposed Departmental amendments.

Clause 18 – Power of Entry

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 18 as drafted subject to the two proposed Departmental amendments.

Clause 19 – Fixed Penalty

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 19 as drafted subject to the two proposed Departmental amendments.

Clause 20 – Guidance

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 20 as drafted.

Clause 21 – Notices

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 21 as drafted subject to the proposed Departmental amendment.

Clause 22 – Appeal

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 22 as drafted.

Clause 23 – Offences: defendant

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 23 as drafted.

Clause 24 - Meaning of interested person etc

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 24 as drafted.

Clause 25 – Other definitions

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 25 as drafted subject to the proposed Departmental amendment.

Clause 26 – Repeals and consequential amendments

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 26 as drafted.

Clause 27 – Savings

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 27 as drafted.

Clause 28 – Regulations

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 28 as drafted.

New Clause 28A to be inserted after Clause 28 - Review of Act

Agreed: The Committee was content with the proposed new Clause 28A as drafted by the Department.

Clause 29 – General Interpretation

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 29 as drafted.

Clause 30 – Commencement

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 30 as drafted.

Clause 31 – Short title

Agreed: The Committee was content with Clause 31 as drafted.

Schedule 1 – Fixed Penalties

Agreed: The Committee was content with Schedule 1 subject to the proposed Departmental amendment.

Schedule 2 – Repeals

Agreed: The Committee was content with Schedule 2 as drafted.

Long Title

Agreed: The Committee was content with Long Title as drafted.

The Chair advised Members that the Committee Stage was now complete and the Committee Team would issue a draft the Committee Bill Report as soon as possible.

The Committee then considered a Clerk's Memo covering proposed Committee recommendations for the Bill Report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the proposed Committee recommendations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to hold an additional meeting on Tuesday 12 May at 10am to consider and agree the draft Committee Report.

The Chairperson thanked the Officials and Bill Officials for their work and attendance at all the meetings.

The Departmental Bill Officials left the meeting at 11:26am

The Committee agreed to move to agenda item 16

16. SL1 The Sheep Carcase Classification and Price Reporting Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee noted the Department intends to make the SR under the draft affirmative procedure to introduce mandatory sheep carcase classification and price reporting in Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted Officials provided an oral briefing on 26 February and then on 26 March it took evidence from representatives from NIMEA, ABP Food Group and Dunbia, outlining their concerns regarding the unintended consequences of the SR.

The Committee noted it heard again from Officials on 30 April and agreed to write to the Department requesting further clarification on some aspects of the SR.

The Committee considered the response from the Department to queries raised at last week's briefing from Officials.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it would return to the matter on 21 May to further consider the Department's response.

8. SL1 The Farming with Nature Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee noted it had a policy briefing from Officials on the proposals at the meeting on 30 April.

The Committee heard that the Department intends to make the SR under the negative resolution procedure to provide it with the legal powers to update payment rates, expand eligibility, and introduce additional actions to Year 2 of the Farming with Nature Transition Scheme.

A Member queried the definition of “permanent grassland sensitive areas” as referred to in the proposed regulations and how this may affect areas with natural constraints.

A Member also suggested that, in support of biosecurity, the Scheme would benefit from the inclusion of semi-permanent fencing to protect buffer zones.

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 28 May, 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.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek clarification on the definition of “permanent grassland sensitive areas,” and its potential impact on areas of natural constraint; and if consideration would be given to include semi-permanent fencing within the Scheme.

9. Departmental Written Briefing – Peatland Strategy Delivery Plan April 2026 to December 2027.

The Committee noted the first Peatland Strategy Delivery Plan sets 14 short-term targets to help deliver peatland conservation, restoration, and management for the period April 2026 - December 2027 and will contribute to achieving the Land Use, Land Use Change & Forestry targets in the draft NI Climate Action Plan, the Environmental Improvement Plan, and the Nature Recovery Strategy.

The Committee noted the tasks in the Action Plan include the collation of a Peatland Asset Register; peatland restoration and wildfire management; research;

communications; and the establishment of a DAERA Programme Management Board and a Stakeholder Forum.

A Member raised concerns on the challenges of achieving a balanced approach between peatland restoration and afforestation.

A Member also called for the Department to consider placing an emphasis on prioritising the planting of native species of trees that offer greater biodiversity value.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarification of its efforts to manage the challenges and seeming juxtaposition arising from peatland restoration and afforestation; consider prioritising the planting of native species of trees; and how the delivery of the Peatland Strategy Delivery Plan contributes to the '30 by 30' nature recovery targets.

10. Departmental Written Briefing – Department for Infrastructure Legislation in Relation to Reverse Vending Machines for the Deposit Return Scheme

The Committee considered the briefing paper and a copy of the SR -The Planning (General Permitted Development) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 and the Explanatory Memorandum.

The Committee noted the SR is DfI legislation, developed jointly by DAERA and DfI, to introduce Permitted Development Rights for Reverse Vending Machines (RVM) delivering on the Deposit Return Scheme (DRS) and will come into operation on 13 May 2026.

The Committee also noted the DRS is a circular-economy measure that will introduce a refundable deposit on single-use drinks containers to incentivise their return for recycling.

The Committee also noted the SR will introduce permitted development rights, thereby removing the requirement for retailers to apply for planning permission to install RVMs outside their premises and will align requirements for RVMs across Northern Ireland, England, and Scotland.

A Member queried if the Department would consider undertaking an assessment to determine if the placing of RVMs outside premises could cause potential obstructions to the public, such as wheelchair users or parents using prams particularly in rural areas.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking clarification if it will consider undertaking an assessment to determine any potential issues regarding the placement of RVMs.

11. Departmental Written Briefing –The Provisional Zootechnical Common Framework and Concordat

The Committee noted The Framework aims to ensure a consistent approach and manage the risk of divergence in zootechnical matters across the UK providing a mechanism for the resolution of disputes via the Devolved Governments' Zootech Working Group (ZWG).

The Committee also noted, Zootech is a voluntary regime that facilitates the trade of pedigree breeding animals and germinal products and applies to the bovine, equine, porcine caprine and ovine species.

The Committee noted there will be a delay in full scrutiny of the Framework due to the upcoming local elections in Scotland and Wales and it is anticipated that approval from the Scottish minister will not be before September 2026.

The Committee noted the Framework will be published once approvals from all UK administrations are in place and a further update will be provided later this year in advance of its scrutiny commencing in the autumn.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the written briefing.

12. Correspondence

The Committee considered correspondence dated 29 April, from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy seeking its views regarding the Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill by 24 June.

The Committee noted the rural needs impact assessment found that stopping onshore petroleum exploration and production may have longer term benefits on the environment and aspects of the rural economy.

The Committee considered requesting that the Committee for the Economy:

- query with the Department for the Economy if it intends to formally assess the long-term environmental benefits of the ban; and share data or analysis with DAERA to support future environmental reporting and policy evaluation;
- seek assurance that any future regulations will be subject to appropriate consultation; and any environmental considerations will be factored in under proposed Ancillary Regulation-Making Powers:
- consider the issue of the short term shock of the financial impact on the rural economy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue a response to the Economy Committee providing its views on the Bill.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 29 April, from an individual the Committee has been copied into regarding FOI / EIR request relating to an Irish News article on Warrenpoint odour complaints.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered the 64th ESR Report dated 30 April which contains no SRs of relevance to the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 30 April, from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council's Agricultural Liaison Group (ALG) requesting for feedback regarding the issues raised at the meeting on 3 April 2025.

The Committee noted that following the fact finding meeting with the ALG it wrote to the Department in April 2025 regarding delays to planning and requested regular

updates on the progress of the Ammonia Strategy and subsequent Ammonia Action Plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek a further update on the Ammonia Strategy and Nutrients Action Plan (NAP) 2026-2029.

The Committee considered a memo, dated 1 May, from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy seeking our views on the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill by 1 July.

Agreed: the Committee agreed it was content to return a NIL response.

13. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

The Committee considered the draft Stakeholder list for the AD event on 4 June.

Agreed: The Committee was content with the list as drafted.

The Committee considered the updated and published RaISe paper on the challenges and opportunities of AD that it previously considered on 23 April.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to alert stakeholders to the RaISe paper when invitations to the AD event are issued.

14. Any Other Business

The Chair raised the issue of the impact of the Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) (Extension to Maritime Activities) Order 2026 on the maritime sector considering the recent rise in fuel prices.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister to ask if the Department is engaging with the Department for the Economy and the maritime industry stakeholders in respect of the rising fuel costs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the maritime industry stakeholders who engaged with the Committee seeking their views of the impacts of the rise in fuel prices.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for the Economy to ask if any work has been undertaken by them or the Department for the Economy in respect of maritime fuel supply and cost.

15. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 12 May at 10:00am in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned 11:53am

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated