



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

14 May 2026

Meeting location: Assembly Marquee at the Balmoral Show

Present:

Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
Aoife Finnegan MLA
Daniel McCrossan MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Áine Murphy MLA
Gareth Wilson 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
Sarah Dowd, Clerical Officer

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:08am

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.

None were declared.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Department, dated 8 May, regarding the DAERA appointed Expert Advisory Group's Review of Dog Breeding Regulations.

The Committee noted that the report details the Group's review of current legislation and the physical and behavioural welfare issues associated with the breeding and selling of dogs.

The Committee noted the report contains 11 main recommendations including licensing thresholds, the number of dogs to be kept at breeding establishments, limitations on breeding from females, staffing levels and provisions for stud dogs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 5 May, from the all-island Native Irish Honeybee Society regarding concerns that current import routes and biosecurity arrangements may increase risks to bee health both North and South and are seeking to engage with the Committee on the matter.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the request to the Forward Work Programme to the list of potential briefings and potentially tag to a previously agreed visit to the Assembly Beehives.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from an individual regarding the pay dispute between DAERA and a group of Veterinary Inspectors. Members noted on 30 April it considered correspondence, from NIPSA requesting to engage with the Committee regarding the Veterinary Inspector Pay and Grading Dispute and agreed to invite a NIPSA delegation to brief the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to prioritise the meeting with NIPSA.

The Chairperson referred to a Draft Press Release regarding the Committee's visit to the Balmoral Show.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to publish the press release as drafted.

The Chairperson referred to the Department's response, dated 6 May, the Committee considered at its meeting on 7 May on further queries regarding The Sheep Carcase Classification and Price Reporting Regulations.

The Committee noted it had agreed to postpone consideration of the response until 21 May to give Members time to properly consider it.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the response to NIMEA and the NI Sheep Taskforce for their consideration.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 7 May 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered correspondence from Shared Environmental Services stating it is considering the possibility of becoming a member of the Planning Statutory Consultee Forum and will notify the Committee of its decision in due course.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to Committee for the Economy, dated 8 May, regarding a proposed Joint Concurrent Meeting with that Committee at 9:30am in the Senate Chamber on Wednesday 1 July 2026.

The Committee noted that evidence will be heard from the Competition and Markets Authority in respect of its review of the domestic heating oil market, which was raised during the informal roundtable discussion with the Economy Committee on 5 May.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to attend the meeting.

The QUB Centre for Advanced Sustainable Energy (CASE) representatives joined the meeting at 10:13am

6. Oral Evidence Session with the QUB Centre for Advanced Sustainable Energy (CASE)

The following CASE representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr Ian Marshall OBE, Head of Business Development and Policy;
- Professor David Rooney, Director; and
- Dr Neil Harrison, Green Innovation Challenge Fund Manager.

The Committee were briefed on the work and background of CASE.

The Committee heard that there was a need to recognise the scale of opportunity that the production of biomethane through Anaerobic Digestion (AD) could bring to meeting NI energy needs but that a cross departmental approach was required.

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

- Planning delays and the need for early engagement with NIEA to address issues;
- Lack of clear guidelines for farmers regarding acceptable levels of ammonia;
- Concerns that AD plant operators may compete with farmers for silage - land for food or land for fuel;
- The need for farmers to find the balance between using land for energy production and food production;
- Opportunities for rural communities to benefit from transition to green energy;

- The need to move from siloed thinking to a single joined up and ambitious cross-departmental approach, alongside councils, in order to attract large scale investment; and
- The need for government to provide leadership and establish a strategic plan to have an overarching scheme to integrate all green growth strategies in Northern Ireland.

The Chairperson thanked representatives for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the NIEA to inform them of the matters discussed and to highlight the need for wider stakeholder engagement to develop a strategic plan in support of anaerobic digestion and green growth.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to DAERA and the Department for the Economy to request information on the frameworks or schemes currently in place or which are being considered to support the green growth strategy, and how efforts are being coordinated.

The representatives left the meeting at 11:15am

7. Departmental Written Briefing - Consultation on the development of fisheries management measures for Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) in the Northern Ireland offshore region

The Committee noted that on 1 June the Department intends to launch a 12-week public consultation on the introduction of management measures for fishing activities in three MPAs in the Northern Ireland offshore region to support fishing at sustainable levels while protecting the marine environment in relation to MPAs in accordance with the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009.

The Committee also noted the Department will provide a copy of the consultation document prior to its release and subject to the outcome of the consultation, it may introduce legislation via the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the written briefing

8. Departmental Written Briefing – EU Animal Health Law (AHL) Requirements for Camelids and Cervids.

The Committee noted the AHL, provides the framework for preventing and controlling animal diseases transmissible to terrestrial and aquatic animals e.g. bTB, Foot and Mouth Disease and Bluetongue and introduces new Identification, Registration and Movement requirements for camelids (e.g. alpacas, llamas) and cervids (deer, reindeer) in Northern Ireland.

The Committee also noted that previously, only a voluntary scheme existed under repealed EU legislation but under the AHL, keepers must now register their establishments with the Department; identify animals within 9 months of birth or before they leave the holding of birth; and keep records for a minimum of three years.

The Committee noted implementation is being phased in to allow keepers to adapt to the changes and by 30 September 2026 all establishments must be registered on NIFAIS, and by 4 January 2027 all animals must be formally identified using an approved method.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the briefing.

9. Departmental Written Briefing – Synopsis of Responses to recent Consultation on Impacts on the Water Environment

The Committee considered the written briefing noting details of the call for evidence, launched in April 2025, seeking views on the pressures impacting water bodies, (including pollution from agriculture, wastewater treatment, and industrial activities) to inform the planning for the Fourth Cycle River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) (2028– 2033).

The Committee noted the findings also informed the Significant Water Management Issues report, which is currently open for public consultation and closes on 18 June 2026.

The Department states it intends to develop a Programme of Measures to reduce the pressures impacting on water bodies based on four strategic pillars: Education; Incentivisation and Innovation; Regulation; and Enforcement.

The Committee noted the draft fourth cycle RBMP will be published for a six month consultation at the end of 2026 and subject to Executive approval the final fourth RBMP will be published in December 2027.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the written briefing.

10. Correspondence

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 7 May, it has been copied into from the Assembly and Executive Review Committee inviting the DAERA Permanent Secretary to give evidence on 29 September 2026 as part of its review of Assembly Committee engagement on cross-cutting Executive strategies.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a memo, dated 7 May, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding the Management of the Vote on Account as agreed in the Budget Act (NI) 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note

The Committee considered correspondence, it has been copied into, from an individual to Minister Muir requesting a substantive response to a previous request for a statement regarding waste storage at a Re-Gen Waste site.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

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 AERA Committee meeting will be held on Thursday 21 May at 11:30am in Room 29, Parliament Buildings. Prior to that meeting the Committee will meet concurrently with the Communities Committee in the Senate Chamber at 10am.

The meeting was adjourned 11:21am

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated