



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

## Minutes of Proceedings

6 November 2025

**Meeting location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast**

**Present:** Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)  
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
John Blair MLA  
Aoife Finnegan MLA  
William Irwin MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Áine Murphy MLA

**In Attendance:** James Gilsenan, Acting Assembly Clerk  
Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor  
Sarah Dowd, Clerical Officer

***The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:18am***

***Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting at 10:20am***

## **1. Apologies**

Daniel McCrossan MLA

Tom Buchanan MLA

## **2. Declaration of Interests**

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

Declan McAleer MLA declared that he is an executor and owner of a small farm in Co Tyrone.

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

The Chair declared that he is the owner of a septic tank.

## **3. Chairperson's Business**

The Chair provided an update of the meeting he attended along with the Deputy Chair on 3 November with the Ulster Farmers Union (UFU).

The Chair summarised the conversation and informed members that a note was taken by the Clerk for distribution to the Committee.

The Chair provided the Committee with details of his attendance and speech at the 2025 Farming Life Awards on Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> October.

The Chair referred to the statement the Minister made in the Chamber on 4 November regarding the Independent Review of Environmental Governance in Northern Ireland and that he was grateful for the advance notice given.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider the Review in Matters Arising.

The Chair referred to the latest news regarding Avian flu and noted Mandatory housing measures for all kept birds and poultry came into on 5 November following the Avian Influenza Prevention Zone that came into force on 1 November.

Members highlighted that much of the flock owners' business is done over the Christmas period and that the Department should ensure that any compensation should reflect this.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to enquire how it intends to determine compensation rates for flock owners affected by the current restrictions; if the compensation framework will take into account the timing of the restrictions; and if it is considering a broader financial support package to help mitigate the wider economic impact on flock owners.

The Chair raised an relating to an alleged whistleblower and the Clerk undertook to seek advice on the next steps.

#### **4. Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 23 October 2025 with a minor amendment.

#### **5. Matters Arising**

The Committee considered correspondence from the Minister dated 21 October regarding the recent publication of the final report of the Independent Review of Environmental Governance in Northern Ireland .

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek a Departmental oral briefing in the New Year on the development of the new Independent Environmental Protection Agency and action plans relating to the implement of other recommendations .

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department dated 24 October in reply to its letter of 17 October regarding The Farm Sustainability Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

The response addressed Equality and Human Rights Screening and powers relating to authorised persons accessing computer or other records relevant to inspections.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to return to the matter during its consideration of the SR later in the meeting.

The Committee considered correspondence from Department dated 24 October regarding The Environmental Protection (Wet Wipes Containing Plastic) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

The Committee noted that it was briefed on the SL1 on 19 November 2024 and Executive approval was received on 30 April 2025.

The Committee noted there have been no change to the policy intent since the SL1 was provided to the committee and the Department plans to lay the statutory rule via negative procedure in November 2025, to align with the coming-into-force date in England and Scotland of June 2027.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider the SR when it has been laid.

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Infrastructure dated 23 October advising that it seeks its views on the Water, Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill by 13 November.

The Committee noted it considered the matter at the meeting on 23 October and agreed to consider the matter further to agree a response.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to return a response to the Clerk to the Committee for Infrastructure seeking clarification on why Sustainable Drainage Systems (SuDS) are not made mandatory from the outset; further detail on how retrofitting is being considered within the Bill's scope; and clarity on how the Department intends to respond to flooding incidents where SuDS alone may be insufficient to deal with flooding issues..

The Committee noted it has received a positive responses from 7 local councils to date to its request for information relating to how they deal with odour complaints.

The Committee noted the response for Shared Environmental Services and noted the SES remit does not extend to the protection of public health and therefore has no role or remit in odour assessments and provides no advice in this regard.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the response from SES.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it would allow more time for the outstanding council responses to be received and then would consider the responses collectively on 20 November.

The Committee considered the response from the Department dated 21 October to queries it raised regarding the Dilapidation Bill.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider the response as written evidence.

The Committee considered the Dilapidation Bill Public opinion informal survey and noted its purpose is to complement the Citizen Space call for evidence as a separate opportunity for others to make some high level comments regarding the Bill.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content for Engagement to issue the survey as drafted with one additional question added.

The Committee considered a written briefing from the Department dated 3 October and correspondence from the Department providing an update regarding the recent occurrence of Asian Hornets.

The Committee noted measures to enhance public awareness include:

Weekly 'Asian hornet' reports to the NIEA Invasive Species team; Enhanced media coverage for spring 2026; awareness training for relevant government officials; and regular engagement with the Ulster Beekeepers' Association.

The Committee also noted that in addition to the Defra 'Asian Hornet Watch' app, the public can also submit reports to the Centre for Environmental Data and Recording (CEDaR) which hosts an invasive species reporting tool.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the matter would be added to the Forward Work Plan and would return to it once the Department commences follow-up monitoring in the Dundonald area in early Spring 2026.

***The Institute of Historic Building Conservation representatives joined the meeting at 10:42am***

***Aine Murphy MLA joined the meeting at 11:12am***

**6. Dilapidation Bill - Oral Evidence Session - Institute of Historic Building Conservation (IoHBC)**

***This item was recorded by Hansard***

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Dr Joanne Curran, NI Chair; and
- Mr Dawson Stelfox, Member of IHBC

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard that the IoHBC broadly welcomes the measures in the Bill.

Issues raised included :safeguards to discourage demolition of heritage buildings and lack of incentives to owners to maintain buildings through repair and regeneration.

A Member expressed concern that there should be caution using public funds to boost private profits.

Other concerns included to the lack of conservation expertise within councils.

The Committee heard that the Bill would be effective only if there is sufficient investment in councils resources and training.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

***The Institute of Historic Building Conservation representatives left the meeting at 11:33am***

***The Retail NI representatives joined the meeting at 11:33am***

**7. Dilapidation Bill - Oral Evidence Session - Retail NI**

***This item was recorded by Hansard***

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr Glyn Roberts, Chief Executive; and
- Mr George Dorrian, Policy Advisor

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard that although the Bill is welcome it is essential that there are sufficient resources provided to councils and a co-ordinated approach between councils and government Departments is also needed to effectively implement the legislation.

The Committee heard that the issue of dilapidated buildings on town centres has a detrimental effect on mental health.

The Committee also heard that fines should be high enough to serve as disincentive to owners who fail to take action.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

***The Retail NI representatives left the meeting at 12:10pm***

***The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 12:11pm***

**8. SR 2025/165 The Farm Sustainability Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025**

***This item was recorded by Hansard***

The Committee noted it had an oral briefing on 2 October and heard that the Department intended to make this SR under negative resolution to replace the current Cross-Compliance arrangements with the new Farm Sustainability Standards and associated penalty regime from 1 January 2026.

The Committee noted the response from the Department to Members relating to concerns raised at the meeting on 23 October including the proposed powers for an authorised person, and the definition of qualifying crops eligible for farm sustainability payments.

The Committee noted the response from the Department regarding the screening it applies to determine when a Statutory Rule requires an Equality Impact Assessment.

The following Agricultural and Environmental Schemes Division (AESD) and Agriculture Policy Division (APD) Officials then briefed the Committee:

- Mrs Anna Campbell – Acting Director AESD;
- Mr George Moffett – Acting Deputy Director APD;
- Mr Aidan McEvoy – Head of Branch – AESD Controls and Assurance Development Branch; and
- Mrs Denise Phillips – Acting Head of Branch – AESD Operational Policy Branch

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard the SR does not increase the limited powers of Authorised Persons but re-enacts those already in place and the Department does not have the authority to seize property.

The Committee also heard that a communication strategy including training is in place to make farmers aware of the changes prior to implementation and to help avoid breaches occurring.

Some Members noted ongoing concerns.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

**Agreed:** The Committee considered SR 2025/165 The Farm Sustainability Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and had no objection to the Rule, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

***The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 12:30pm***

#### **9. SR The Waste (Fees and Charges) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.**

The Committee noted it was briefed on the SL1 on 16 October and heard the Department intends to make this SR under the draft affirmative procedure to bring into effect the annual uplift to the Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) Waste Charging Scheme for 2025-2026.

The Committee noted it agreed that it was content for the Department to make the SR subject to the ESR report (which is still awaited) and the Department has advised there have been no changes to policy content since the SL1 was submitted to the Committee.



**Agreed:** The Committee considered Draft SR: The Waste (Fees and Charges) (Amendment No. 2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and recommended that it be approved by the Assembly.

#### **10. SR The Farm Sustainability Payment Scheme (Eligibility etc) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025**

The Committee noted it was briefed on the SL1 by Officials on 9 October and heard that the SR will be made under the draft affirmative procedure to provide the Department with the legal powers to implement the Farm Sustainability Payment, which forms part of the Sustainable Agriculture Programme and will replace the current Farm Sustainability Transition Payment, with effect from 1 January 2026.

The Committee noted there have been no changes to policy content since the SL1 was submitted to the Committee and the ESR Report has not drawn the SR to the special attention of the Assembly.

At the meeting on 9 October the Motion *Are Members content that the Committee supports the SR as drafted in that debate* was put. The Committee divided and the motion fell - AYES 4 : NOES 4.

Ayes: Declan McAleer MLA, John Blair MLA, Aoife Finnegan MLA, Áine Murphy MLA

Noes: Robbie Butler MLA, Tom Buchanan MLA, William Irwin MLA, Michelle McIlveen MLA

The Committee noted the Chair will reflect the views of the Committee during the plenary debate on the motion tabled by the Minister scheduled for 18 November.

The Committee further noted that a response to its letter of 16 October to the Department relating to participation in The Bovine Genetics Genotyping Scheme is still awaited.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to contact Sustainable Ruminant Genetics Ltd (SRG) seeking additional information.

### **11. Departmental Written Briefing - Update on DfC-led Shaping Sustainable Places Programme (SSP) in collaboration with DAERA & DfI**

The Committee noted the SSP programme is a collaborative regeneration initiative led by the Department for Communities (DfC) Urban Regeneration Division, working in partnership with the Department for Infrastructure (DfI) Active Travel Division and DAERA's Rural Affairs Division.

The Committee noted the Programme will have capital investment of £150m over 10 years with a focus on supporting investment and place shaping on village, town and city centres across Northern Ireland, with each Department contributing £50m. DAERA's investment will be directed towards rural settlements of a population of 5,000 and fewer.

The Committee noted the draft consultation report will be compiled by DfC and Officials are developing the Outline Business Case (OBC) with a view for approval by Spring 2026 and following Executive approval Programme delivery will then commence.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request an oral briefing on the draft consultation report when completed.

### **12. Departmental Written Briefing - Update on DAERA Planning Performance**

The Committee noted that to improve statutory planning consultation requests responses and improve customer service NIEA is developing a 5 strand Planning Improvement Plan (PIP) addressing Technical advice and guidance; Caseload management ; Monitoring and reporting on performance ; Process and IT systems; and Communication and stakeholder engagement.

The Committee noted that ongoing resourcing issues contributing to the current backlog of 353 cases (of which 32 relate to agricultural proposals) are being addressed and the PIP also aims to reduce the volume of consultations received.

The Committee also noted the average number of days taken to respond decreased from 29 days in 2024/25 to 25 days in 2025/26 and noted measures taken by the Department to date to improve the quality of consultations.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department requesting a detailed breakdown of the current backlog of 353 consultations, by sectors; clarification of the full range of response times; specific factors contributing to ongoing delays in certain consultations; and how the Department currently manages staffing resources to meet the demand for application processing.

### **13. Departmental Written Briefing - Update on Lough Neagh Action Plan**

The Committee noted that the briefing provided a summary of the progress on the implementation of the Lough Neagh Report and Action Plan including 37 actions, to date 14 of which have been delivered, 22 are progressing and 1 remains dependent on another action being taken forward.

The Committee noted actions delivered to date including Water Quality monitoring outreach events; Sustainable Utilisation of Livestock Slurry (SULS) SBRI projects; Lough Neagh Science Platform and The Lough Neagh Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) Group Project.

The Committee also noted that In relation to Progressing Actions, updates provided include: details of AFBI research and development proposals commissioned; the Water Quality Communications strategy; the development of a Conservation Management Plan; and a scientific review of the environmental impact of sand extraction at Lough Neagh.

The Committee noted In regards to Stakeholder Engagement, Minister Muir has chaired four quarterly Lough Neagh Stakeholder forums, with the next scheduled for December 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request a further oral briefing in the New Year.

**Agreed:** The committee agreed to write to the Department requesting details of what actions, if any, are being considered to bring Lough Neagh into public ownership.

### **14. Correspondence**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the following items detailed in the correspondence memo:

Correspondence from the Department dated 28 October regarding The Publication of a UK ETS Authority Consultation 'UK Emissions Trading Scheme: Aviation Regional Connectivity'.

Correspondence from the Department dated 27 October regarding the first formal meeting of the NAP Stakeholder Task and Finish Group held on 22 October.

The 48th Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR).

A Clerks memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Communities dated 28 October regarding the Climate Change Action Plan advising that Committee has request a briefing from DAERA Officials on the Plan and the role and the responsibilities it places on the Department of Communities.

A memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance dated 23 October advising ehe ESR is satisfied that the delegation of legislative power currently provided for in Clause 16 Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill was "not inappropriate".

A memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance, dated 23 October, regarding Analysis of 2025-26 Outturn and Forecast Outturn.

A memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance, dated 23 October, regarding commissioning a December Monitoring Round stating that departmental returns must be made by 20th November.

Correspondence that the Committee has been copied into from the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee to Defra - providing further updates in the following matters within the scope of the Windsor Framework regarding the European Chemicals Agency; Wine sector and aromatised wine products; and Scrutiny Committee (WFSC) Document Review.

Correspondence regarding the 'Food Law Code of Practice (Northern Ireland)' laid before the Assembly by the Food Standards Agency.

A report from Better Food Traders – a UK network supporting retailers who sell locally produced food titled: 'Purpose over Profit' How alternative food retail can make the Food Strategy a success.

Notification from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission to save the date for the launch of the Annual Human Rights Statement 2025 on Monday 8th December from 12-2pm.

Correspondence dated 2 November the Committee has been copied into from Save the Moat regarding Formal Statutory Notification – ETSU-R-97, Low-Frequency Wind Turbine Noise and Human Rights: Urgent Policy Correction and Protections for Residents.

Correspondence dated 3 November the Committee has been copied into from an individual regarding the AFBI date breach.

Correspondence from Foyle Association of Salmon and Trout Anglers (FASTA) requesting to engage with the Committee.

Email correspondence dated 3 November from the Animal Justice Project regarding revelations of antibiotic-resistant superbugs on Northern Ireland's pig farms.

#### **14. Forward Work Programme**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider the Forward Work Programme at the next meeting.

#### **15. Any Other Business**

The Chair reminded Members that the Committee NAP Stakeholder Event will take place on 13 November in the Stormont Hotel.

The Chair noted that there is a motion on Establishing an Independent Environmental Protection Agency on the Opposition Day Order Paper on 10 November.

#### **16. Date and Time of Next Meeting**

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 13 November at Room 21, Parliament Buildings at 10.00am

***The meeting was adjourned at 12:55pm***

**Signature: .....**

**Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson**

**Dated .....**