



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

08 October 2026

Meeting location: Room 21 Parliament Buildings

Present: Diana Armstrong (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
Aoife Finnegan MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Gareth Wilson MLA

Via Zoom: Daniel McCrossan MLA until 12:17pm, then in person

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:11am

Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting at 10:19am

Daniel McCrossan MLA joined the meeting by zoom 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.

The Chairperson declared an interest due to having a farming background.

Declan McAleer MLA declared an interest in the Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill as the Bill Sponsor.

John Blair MLA declared an interest in the Hunting with Dogs Bill as the Bill Sponsor.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to a memo from the AERA Clerk to the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy scoping the potential for a joint concurrent meeting regarding the Openreach Digital switchover, as the matter overlaps with the remit of that Committee

The Committee noted it discussed this matter under AOB last week and agreed to explore a possible evidence session with Openreach on the rural impacts and how it is supporting rural customers.

The Clerk is awaiting a response once that Committee has had the opportunity to consider it.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to an invitation from CILIP Ireland to a drop in event titled Libraries Deliver: Impact, Outcomes and Value for Communities between 12- 3pm on 3 November at Room 115, Parliament Buildings.

The Committee noted the event will bring together library services from across Northern Ireland to showcase the breadth and impact of their work and that representatives from the CAFRE Enniskillen and Loughry campus libraries will be attending.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the invitation individually.

The Chairperson referred to an invitation from Abercorn Estates for the Committee to visit the Estate in Newtownstewart and hear details of its work in terms of agriculture, forestry, renewable energy, tourism, field sports, and other levels of community engagement.

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

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from NIMGA dated 1 October in relation to some matters of concern it has regarding the Department's horticulture pilot programme.

The Committee noted NIMGA have also written to the Minister on the matter raising concerns regarding a lack of engagement in the development of the Fruit and Vegetable (FVAS) successor scheme and that proposed changes to the legislation governing the FVAS, will not enable the industry to achieve parity with growers in the Republic of Ireland who have access to more substantial financial support.

The Committee noted that NIMGA are concerned that a joint meeting proposed by the Minister in February with him, NIMGA and the Northern Ireland Office, on issues facing the sector, has yet to be arranged and that NIMGA wish to be informed what is being considered in the successor scheme in terms of financial support.

The Committee noted that NIMGA have offered an oral briefing on the matters raised.

The Committee noted that in order to support the Agriculture Bill during the Committee Stage, the Committee were given certain assurances by the Department including that the existing scheme would not end until there is a suitable successor in place.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for a response on the matters raised by NIMGA.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council dated 2 October seeking Departmental guidance on the minimum essential requirements for animal handling facilities which are located away from existing

buildings on the farm holding, to assist the Council in the consideration of future planning applications involving similar proposals.

The Committee noted the Council has also written to the Minister and the Chief Planner in relation to these matters.

Some Members felt that further clarification was required of the exact nature of the proposal the Council was considering.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Council to request clarification of the exact nature of the proposal it was considering, to determine if the Committee can assist in the matter.

The Chairperson advised that the Clerk has been approached in connection with a Zoom link being issued to all Members for every meeting by default, rather than a request having to be sent to the Committee team each time.

The team had checked with Broadcasting and noted that some Committees operate that way, and others require Members to request the link meeting by meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that Members would continue to notify the Committee Team on a meeting by meeting basis if a zoom link is required; that Members would ensure that if using Zoom their camera would be on as much as possible; and that the Clerk still needs to be advised if Members intend to be on Zoom or attend in person and that with Bill deliberations approaching the Chair would prefer Members in the room as much as possible.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 5 October from Causeway Coast Dog Rescue (CCDR) outlining its concerns on the progression of Lucy's Law.

The Committee noted last week it considered a response from the Department advising of a two phased approach, with phase one introducing legislation to prohibit third-party sales and supplies of puppies, and sales of kittens, and will introduce related sales and advertising conditions; and Phase two, will introduce registration requirements and remains a policy objective to be brought forward at a later date.

The Committee noted, CCDR believes that the deferral of Phase 2 leaves a significant gap in the proposed arrangements for public verification, traceability and enforcement and have offered the Committee some points it may wish to consider raising with the Department to assist its scrutiny of the proposed phase-one regulations when they are brought forward.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to return to the matter when the legislation is brought forward for scrutiny.

The Chairperson referred to a further letter from CCDR, dated 6 October, regarding the launch in Parliament Buildings on Tuesday 6 October of its Animal Welfare Manifesto 2026 to 2030 at its Legislation to Action Conference, which the Chairperson attended in her capacity as Chair.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 1 October 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered the response dated 1 October from Dr Martin Blake regarding the Independent External Review of the DAERA Cattle Cull Operation near Fivemiletown.

The Committee noted on 7 September it met informally with Dr Blake to discuss his report and on 10 September agreed to write to him with suggestions for areas of consideration discussed at the meeting.

The Committee noted that Dr Blake thanked the Committee for its suggestions and advised he will take them into consideration in his report and that although evidence gathering is taking longer than expected he anticipates it will be complete by the end of October.

The Committee noted on 1 October it also agreed to write to the Department to confirm that Dr Blake intends to return to brief the Committee and awaits a response.

A Member queried if the Department had provided a breakdown of the costs of the cull operation or if it is awaiting the outcome of the review. The Clerk advised the Chair that costs had not been received.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the query.

The Committee noted that at the last meeting an item of AOB was raised relating to the issuing of letters of offer regarding the Sustainable Farming Investment Scheme (SFIS).

The Committee noted the Department have now announced that demand for the Scheme is high, and the first letters of offer will issue on 8 October 2026, and successful applicants will have 28 days to accept their letter of offer.

The Committee noted that separate letters of offer will issue for low emission slurry spreading equipment (LESSE) and for non-LESSE equipment.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to establish whether any checks or monitoring arrangements have been implemented to track the use on farms of significant capital purchases supported by DAERA funding.

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:26am

6. Oral Briefing from the Department – Budget Update

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Roger Downey - Finance Director;
- Declan McCarney - Deputy Finance Director;
- Nuala Hennessy - Head of In Year Financial Planning; and
- Gemma Robinson - Head of Future Years Financial Planning.

Officials provided the Committee with a summary of the updated Budget 2029-29/30 Information Gathering Exercise and heard details of the DAERA capital DEL and resource DEL bids.

The Committee heard that the Department is proactively managing down costs until the budget is agreed and that the Secretary of State has contingency powers permitting authorisation of up to 95% of the previous years total budget.

A question and answer session followed, and areas of discussion included:

- An outline of the legal position in the absence of an agreed budget;
- The next steps to be taken until a budget is agreed;
- If a financial breakdown of the budget allocation across Environment, Rural Affairs and Agriculture was available for Committee consideration;
- Whether there is potential for contingency funds such as providing financial support to farmers/fishermen affected by adverse weather conditions; and
- If the Department has any budgetary flexibility to fund any additional schemes included in proposed legislation.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 10:51am

The Young Farmers' Clubs Of Ulster (YFCU) representatives joined the meeting at 10:53am

7. Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill – Evidence Session with Young Farmers' Clubs Of Ulster (YFCU)

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Kristina Fleming – YFCU President;
- Harry Chambers - YFCU AERA Committee Chairman;
- Daniel Sloane -YFCU AERA Committee Vice Chairman; and
- Roberta Simmons – YFCU Membership Development Manager.

The Committee heard that the YFCU supports the principle of restoring targeted support for farmers in severely disadvantaged areas (SDAs) with a recognition of the importance of farm viability and succession planning.

In terms of funding, the Committee heard that it should be based on a multi-year budget through new money and should not result in further reductions to existing farm support payments.

The Committee also heard that the YFCU supports a scheme that establishes clear eligibility and qualifying-land criteria with a minimum stocking requirement; and that it should not have any environmental measures included, which are currently delivered through schemes such as Farming with Nature.

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

- Concerns at the viability of farms due to the disadvantage faced by farmers in SDAs and the impact on succession planning;
- Eligibility requirements including a minimum stocking requirement;
- Possible amendments to strengthen the Bill;
- A recognition of the impact agriculture has on the environment;
- The potential to attach environmental outcomes to payments; and
- Concerns at the availability of funding for the scheme due to current budgetary pressures.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The YFCU representatives left the meeting at 11:22am

The meeting was suspended at 11:22am

The meeting resumed at 11:32am

The FACE (Federation for Hunting and Conservation) Ireland representatives joined the meeting at 11:32am

8. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Evidence Session with FACE Federation for Hunting and Conservation) Ireland; and NARGC (National Association of Regional Game Councils)

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Dan Curley - Chairman Face Ireland;
- Barty Murphy - Secretary - Hunting Association of Ireland
- Sean Woods - Vice Chairman - Hunting Association of Ireland;
- William Montgomery - Irish Master of Foxhounds Association; and
- Austin Fitzpatrick - Member of the Drumming Hounds Pack, Co Cavan.

The Committee heard that FACE considers the Bill not fit for purpose and is disappointed that it make no reference to the cross-border dimension and fails to recognise the all-Ireland perspective.

The Committee heard that there is a need for hunting to control predators and to assist conservation particularly for vulnerable species.

The Committee also heard the rich cultural cross-community heritage and tradition derived from hunting will disappear if the ban is imposed.

The Committee heard that hunting is important form of countryside management and that there has been no study of the potential negative impacts on conservation if a ban was imposed and expressed concerns at the practicality of the two dog rule.

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

- Potential legal liability for owners if dogs stray across the border;
- The community and heritage aspect of hunting;
- Issues around enforcing the Bill due to limited PSNI resources;
- Unintended consequences the ban would have for animal welfare and pest control methods;
- Concerns regarding the potential criminalisation of dog walkers and other unintended consequences arising from the proposed measures;
- Concerns at the practicalities of lawful land management and pest control activities with the two dog limit; and

- The conservation benefits derived from hunting.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The representatives left the meeting at 12:23pm

The Ulster Farmers Union (UFU) representatives joined the meeting at 12:24pm

Gareth Wilson MLA joined the meeting at 12:29pm

9. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Evidence Session with Ulster Farmers' Union

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Glenn Cuddy - Deputy President; and
- Daniel Toft - Policy Officer.

The Committee heard the UFU does not take a view if hunting is right or wrong, but it does not support the Bill and considers it unworkable in its current form.

The Committee heard the Bill would remove discretion from individual landowners and occupiers and create uncertainty, and should be amended so that it is clear, proportionate, and workable for farmers and landowners.

The Committee heard that clearer definitions are required including a defined mental element to ensure that incidental behaviour by dogs during lawful rural activity does not result in criminal liability; and greater clarity around the meaning and application of “knowingly cause or permit.”

The Committee also heard a call for broad exemptions for farming, pest-control, and wildlife-management; consideration of an exemption for terrier work; and reconsideration of the fixed two-dog limit.

The Committee also heard there was a need for penalties to be proportionate and an assessment of the enforcement and resource implications for PSNI and DAERA; and should include a two year review to identify any unintended consequences.

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

- Specific amendments that would provide provisions for landowners to have legal protections if permission is not granted for hunting activities;

- Concerns regarding unintended consequences such as the criminalisation of dog walkers;
- The conservation benefits derived from hunting;
- Concerns at the practicalities of lawful land management and pest control activities with the two dog limit;
- Concerns that proposed penalties may be disproportionate; and
- Concerns at the lack of PSNI resources to ensure sufficient enforcement.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The UFU representatives left the meeting at 12:52pm

10. SL1 The Hemp (Third Country Import) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 - noting stage

The Committee noted the SR is subject to the negative resolution procedure. Its purpose is to amend the Hemp (Third Country Imports) Regulations 2002 as they apply in Northern Ireland, primarily to update and raise the maximum acceptable Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) level of hemp and hemp seeds from third countries, in line with updated EU rules which are directly applicable here under the Windsor Framework.

The Committee noted that Officials are scheduled to brief the Committee on the SR on 12 November.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note receipt of the SL1 and proposed SR 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 12 November, when it will be briefed by Officials after the Committee has conducted and analysed responses to its Citizen Space survey.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a briefing from Officials is not necessary at this stage.

11. SL1- Waste Fees and Charges (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 - noting stage

The Committee noted the purpose of the SR, subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure, is to give effect to the increase in fees and charges from the Waste Management Charging Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2026/27, which applied from 1 April 2026.

The Committee noted if the SR is not updated, NIEA will not be able to recover all its costs and would be breaching the principles of Managing Public Money Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted that Officials are scheduled to brief the Committee on the SR on 5 November.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note receipt of the SL1 and proposed SR 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 5 November, when it will be briefed by Officials after the Committee has conducted and analysed responses to its Citizen Space survey.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a briefing from Officials is not necessary at this stage.

12. Correspondence

Agreed: The Committee agreed to action the following items of correspondence as detailed in the correspondence memo.

A memo dated 30 September, from the Clerk to the Committee for Communities regarding Fermanagh and Omagh District Council - Rural Affairs Research Paper- Committee for Communities September 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 30 September, from the Clerk to the Committee for Communities regarding Anti-Poverty Strategy – Planned Actions and Financial Bids.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 2 October, from the Clerk to the Committee for Economy regarding a briefing it received on 9 September from the Competition and Markets Authority outlining the key points in its report into home heating oil, in respect of the NI market.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence from the Department dated 28 September regarding a Report on Canine Fertility Services in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence that the Committee has been copied into between Defra and the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee, providing further updates on a range of matters within the scope of the Windsor Framework relating to: (EU) regulation 2023/1115 as regards certain obligations of operators and traders.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Youth Assembly Update - September 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

13. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

14. Any Other Business

None

15. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 13 October at 10:00am in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned 1pm

Signature:

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated