



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

16 April 2026

Meeting location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

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

Via Zoom: Daniel McCrossan 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 10:12am

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 of Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Deputy Chairperson referred to correspondence from Seafresh NI to the Department, dated 24 March, that the Committee has been copied into, regarding the proposed closed season for periwinkles in Strangford Lough. Seafresh believes the new proposals may have serious implications to Periwinkles stocks elsewhere as a result of the displacement of gatherers.

The Committee noted that the SR Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 to prohibit periwinkle gathering in the Northern Ireland inter-tidal zone during January to April each year, was revoked and the Department will be putting forward a new SL1 in due course.

A Member raised a query regarding the Departmental costs that were incurred in the SR Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and concerns were raised regarding issues that can arise if scrutiny periods are rushed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note and consider the issues raised in due course when the Department puts forward the proposed new SR.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence dated 24 March from Stena Line and the UK Chamber of Shipping thanking the Committee for its engagement with them

on the Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) (Extension to Maritime Activities) Order 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Department regarding the Publication of the Third Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme (NICCAP3) which was laid in the Assembly on 19 March 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to the Competition and Markets Authority final report into its market investigation into veterinary services for household pets. The Committee noted the independent inquiry group found that a lack of information to help people make informed decisions is leading to weak competition and high prices.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to the Agricultural Wages (Amendment) Order 2026 which was laid on 23 March.

The Committee noted the Agricultural Wages Board for Northern Ireland, in exercise of the powers, has given notice of its proposals and has varied the minimum rates of wages for workers employed in agriculture for time-work as set out in the Schedule to the Order. The Committee also noted there is no further Assembly Procedure in connection with the Order.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to a series of six thematic papers recently published by RalSe-PFSU Briefing Paper Series to support Assembly scrutiny of the Draft Budget 2026-2029/30.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 1 April, from the Ulster Farmers Union (UFU) regarding its Next Generation Forum, requesting an opportunity for engagement with the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to an informal session with the Next Generation Forum.

The Chairperson referred to a memo, dated 3 April, from the Clerk to the Committee for Education regarding the General Teaching Council NI Bill requesting that the Committee respond with any relevant, cross-cutting scrutiny points by 1 May 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to return a NIL response.

The Chairperson referred to a memo dated 31 March from the Clerk to the Committee for Justice regarding the Call for Evidence for the Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill which completed its second stage on 16 March requesting any response by 7 May 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Clerk would consider the Bill and determine if there are areas the Committee should consider.

The Chairperson referred to the Minister's Oral Statement to the Assembly on Tuesday 14 April regarding AFBI and associated governance matters.

The Committee noted Members received a copy of the statement by email in advance and that the Chair and the Deputy Chair met with the Minister in advance of him delivering the statement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request sight of the GB HSE Report identifying areas where biosafety, laboratory working practices, and associated assurance arrangements need to be strengthened in advance of it being published by the Department.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite AFBI and the Department together to brief the Committee on the proposed plans for improvement.

The Chairperson referred to the joint concurrent meeting with the Committee for Infrastructure to take evidence on two bodies that fall within that Committee's remit - NI Water regarding water pollution and Lough Neagh and also from the Planning Statutory Consultee Forum on planning issues.

The Committee noted it will be held in the Senate Chamber on Tuesday 21st April at 10:00am and the AERA Chair will chair the meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 19 March, from the Clerk to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Committee regarding its visit to Northern Ireland from 13-14 May, requesting to engage with the Committee at the Balmoral Show.

The Committee noted a proposal to meet informally with the EFRA Committee in the Assembly Marquee on Thursday 14 May.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to meet informally with the EFRA Committee at the Balmoral Show on 14 May.

The Chairperson referred to the recent fuel protests and proposed a round table informal session with the Economy Committee on the issues of the cost, supply and storage of fertiliser and fuel prior to agreeing any further possible Committee action.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to contact the Economy Committee to propose an informal meeting to discuss the matter of the cost, supply and storage of fertiliser and fuel.

Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting at 10:17am

John Bair MLA joined the meeting at 10:21am

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meetings held on 19th and 26th March 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 25 March, regarding the Farm Sustainability Payment Entitlement.

The Committee noted on 13 March it queried if application numbers to the Young Farmers Payment (YFP) scheme have risen, what is the evidence showing that this has not translated into any change in the age profile of heads of holding.

The Committee noted data taken from the EU Integrated Farm Survey demonstrated that there was no noticeable change in the age structure of heads of holdings from 2013 to 2023.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response from the Department regarding queries raised during Dilapidation Bill Deliberations on 12 March.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note and return to the matter during its Bill deliberations later in the meeting.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 20 March, regarding a query it considered from an individual regarding the supply of veterinary medicines and publication of Veterinary prescription fulfilment outlets.

The Committee noted that DAERA cannot provide a list of pharmacies and retailers but provided other suggested routes.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the individual to alert them to the other routes to information regarding the supply of veterinary medicines and publication of Veterinary prescription fulfilment outlets.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 19 March, from Belfast City Council (BCC) regarding a delay in providing an update on Environmental Health and Enforcement measures relating to asbestos contamination at the former Ulster Weavers site on Maldon / Meridi Street in Belfast. The Committee noted that a substantive response from BCC is expected by 27 April.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response, dated 1 April, from the Minister relating to asbestos contamination at the former Ulster Weavers site on Maldon / Meridi Street in Belfast stating that a criminal investigation into potential breaches of The Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997 (WCLO) is ongoing.

The Minister provided a timeline of actions taken since NIEA was first aware of the issue in 2011, including the mitigation measures taken since 16 May 2025 when it became aware that asbestos waste remained on the site and that the site had been breached.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered the RalSe paper it commissioned providing a broad overview of some of the Anaerobic Digestion development challenges and opportunities in Northern Ireland to inform plans for a proposed AD stakeholder event.

The Committee noted the paper is restricted due to some of the content being commercially sensitive.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the AD event and the RalSe paper in more detail on 23 April when RalSe officials will provide a briefing at an informal planning session on AD.

The Committee considered a response, dated 16 March, from the Department for the Economy (DfE) regarding Reciprocal Tariffs by the United States of America in

response to a request for further clarity on the reported 27% decline in exports to the US, with a particular emphasis on the agri-food sector.

The Committee noted the response included a Table providing a breakdown of all NI exports to the US by sector for the year ending Q3 2024 and the year ending Q3 2025, including the value and percentage changes for those sectors relating to agri-food.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 18 March, in response to a request for an update on the development and progression the Sustainable Farming Investment Scheme.

The Committee noted the Scheme regulations are to be under the negative resolution procedure made using powers under the Agriculture Act (Northern Ireland) 1949, which requires approval by the Department of Finance (DoF), the business case development is ongoing and DAERA will seek approval from DoF as soon as possible.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 31 March from the Department regarding an Update on the Fisheries and Water Environment Bill.

The Committee noted work has been ongoing drafting the Bill and as the intention is to introduce it to the Assembly prior to the summer recess officials are prioritising policy areas such as the aquaculture policy to remove Fish Culture Licenses.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department requesting clarification of any amendments to the Bill on these licenses.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 27 March, from the Department regarding the Assembly debate of the draft Climate Change (Just Transition Commission) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee noted on 12 March, it agreed that the draft Regulations could proceed to the NI Assembly for debate and there have been no changes to policy content since it considered the SL1. The Assembly debate is scheduled for Monday 27 April.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 2 April, from the Department regarding an update on the SI, the Employment Rights Act 2025 (Enforcement) (Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2026 and noted the legislation came into force on 7 April.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

6. Areas of Natural Constraint (Payments Bill)

The Committee noted the Committee Stage started on Tuesday 24 March 2026 and the last day of Committee Stage will be Tuesday 19 May 2026. The Committee considered a motion to extend the Committee stage.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to the motion to extend the Committee stage to 22 January 2027.

The Committee considered correspondence from the RSPB, dated 16 March, providing its views on the ANC Bill. The RSPB state that it is important to consider how ANC payments should support environmental outcomes and contribute to the sustainability of ANC farms and to nature recovery.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence and consider evidence from RSPB in due course.

The Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and Building Control NI (BCNI) representatives joined the meeting at 10:35am

7. Dilapidation Bill - Oral Evidence Session - Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and Building Control NI (BCNI)

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Cllr Matt Garrett, Vice President, NILGA;
- Ms Alison Allen, Chief Executive, NILGA;
- Mr Tom Lavery, Chair, Building Control Northern Ireland, Armagh City; and
- Mr Ian Harper, Building Control Manager, Belfast City Council

The Committee heard that councils have consistently supported the intent of the Bill but that despite engagement with the Department and proposed amendments to address structural issues in the Bill concerns over its practical implementation remain. The Committee also heard that although statutory guidance is important it cannot correct gaps in the legislation.

A question and answer session followed:

Areas of concerns included:

- Gaps in legislation exposing councils to legal and financial risk;
- Difficulties with cost recovery mechanisms for buildings where owners are unknown;
- Concerns that the draft statutory guidance is unworkable;
- A lack of proper engagement with councils in the co-design of the Bill;
- Potential Issues with enforcement of the legislation.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that NILGA and BCNI would provide the Committee with a paper outlining more detailed specifics of its concerns and proposed amendments on a clause by clause basis to be considered at the next meeting.

The Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and Building Control NI (BCNI) representatives left the meeting at 11:24am

The Chair referred to the Committee external meeting at Exploris Aquarium Portaferry on 30 April and proposed a postponement due to the need to devote further time to the Bill prior to the end of the Committee stage on 15 May.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to postpone the external meeting at Exploris Aquarium Portaferry on 30 April.

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

The Chairperson stated that the Committee will now move towards making some informal decisions 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 queries raised to the DAERA Bill Officials.

The meeting went into closed session at 11:26am

The meeting resumed in public session at 12:43pm

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 12:43pm

9. Dilapidation Bill - Evidence session with DAERA Bill Officials

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Chair gave a summary, for the record, of the discussions during the closed session including:

- Potential for inclusion of a review clause;
- Possible amendments to the financial effects on the EFM
- Assembly Bill Officials to meet with NILGA and BCNI in order to gain a better understanding of their concerns and proposed amendments.

The Chairperson requested that the Departmental Bill Officials address the queries discussed in the closed session. The Officials advised that the Department was content to consider a Review clause in the legislation and the financial effects on the EFM.

A question and answer session followed:

Officials stated there appears to be a misunderstanding on behalf of BCNI of the outworkings of the Emergency action provision in the bill and have addressed this and other issues raised in writing to NILGA and BCNI.

The Officials also advised that it would be helpful if BCNI and NILGA would provide a paper outlining its concerns, issues, and proposed amendments on a clause by clause basis as they have previously asked them to provide it.

The Chairperson thanked the Officials for their attendance.

The Departmental Bill Officials left the meeting at 12:56pm

The Committee agreed to move to Agenda item 11

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 12:57pm

11.The Sheep Carcase Classification and Price Reporting Regulations

The Committee noted that the SL1 was submitted to the Committee on 15 January and on 26 February it was briefed by Officials and heard the Department intends to make the SR under the affirmative procedure to introduce mandatory sheep carcase classification and price reporting in Northern Ireland.

The Committee also noted on 26 March it took evidence from NI Meat Exporters Association; ABP Food Group and Dunbia regarding concerns raised relating to unintended consequences of the SR. A Member suggested a site visit to a processor may assist Committee scrutiny on the matter.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to hear further from Officials to address the issues raised during the briefing on 26 March before making a decision whether or not it is content to support the SR as drafted in the debate in the Assembly on 19 May.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to look at options and the viability of a site visit to a processor.

12.SL1 The Cattle Identification (No. 2) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee noted that the Department intends to make this SR under the negative resolution procedure to introduce minor technical amendments to existing

domestic cattle identification legislation, to enable the voluntary implementation of Electronic Identification (EID) of cattle in Northern Ireland (NI).

The Committee noted it considered a written briefing on this matter on 11 December 2025, outlining the benefits of EID and on proposals to introduce voluntary EID from July 2026.

The Committee also noted The Department has advised that mandatory EID is proposed for 2027, subject to the outcome of a public consultation, which closed 23 February 2026 and will require further legislation.

The Committee noted that Officials are scheduled to brief the Committee on the SR on 14 May and noted that it has now received the SL1 and that the minimum 4-week process has commenced before it agrees, or otherwise, the SL1.

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 14 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.

13. Departmental Written Briefing - Annual Uplift of Marine Licensing Fees

The Committee considered the written briefing detailing a rise in marine licensing fees of 2.94% for the financial year 2026/27 starting from 1 April.

The Committee noted that DAERA is the marine licensing authority for the Northern Ireland inshore region (0-12 nautical miles) and licensing fees are set out in the Marine Licensing (Application Fees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011, for activities such as construction, dredging and marine renewable energy installations.

The Committee noted the Regulations sets out a requirement to vary fees annually taking into account inflation based on the GDP index which for 2025/26 is 2.94%.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the written briefing.

14. Departmental Written Briefing - Publication of Plastic Pollution Plan for Northern Ireland Consultation Responses.

The Committee noted the 12 week consultation on the Plastic Pollution Plan for Northern Ireland (PPP NI) ended on 24th September 2025. The PPP NI aims to collate the targets incorporated in existing policies and strategies and actions that will contribute to a reduction in plastic pollution.

The Committee noted that out of a total of 71 responses 73% were receptive to the proposed objectives and actions for the plan but highlighted a lack of awareness of the cumulative impact of these actions and strengthened the need for an overarching and easily accessible document to encourage public 'buy-in' to future actions.

The Committee noted once the Plan has been finalised later this year it will be provided with a further update.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the written briefing.

15. Departmental Written Briefing - Consultation report of the draft Climate Action Plan [2023-2027].

The Committee considered the briefing providing an update on the response to the Climate Action Plan (CAP) consultation and detail on the next steps.

The Committee noted the 16 week consultation on the draft CAP closed on 8 October 2025 with a total of 224 responses and considered the findings set out in the summary of responses document provided.

The Committee noted the Department is now working to incorporate the key findings from the consultation into the Climate Action Plan which will be published subject to Executive approval and will be provided with further updates in due course.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the briefing.

16. Correspondence

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the following items of correspondence.

- Correspondence from the Department, dated 25 March, regarding the Publication of Three Nation Call for Evidence: Increasing the Uptake of Reusable Packaging Systems.
- Correspondence from the Department, dated 25 March, regarding the Upcoming Publication of a Consultation on Sustainable Aviation Fuel (SAF) Recognition in the UK Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS).
- A copy of Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report 1 April 2024 - 31 March 2025.
- A memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance dated 25 March regarding the 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn – February 2026 (R11).
- A memo from the Clerk to the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee, dated 26 March, regarding publication of its report on Regulation (EU) 2026/405 on detergents and surfactants, and repealing Regulation (EC) No 648/2004.
- A copy of the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) Public Reporting Programme 2026-27.
- Correspondence the Committee has been copied into between the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee and Defra regarding Regulation 2026/405 on Detergents and Surfactants, and Repealing Regulation 648/2004; and Regulation 2018/848 - Production labelling and Certification Rules, and Certain Rules on Trade with Third Countries.
- Two items of correspondence dated 24 March that the Committee has been copied into from an individual, regarding a Formal Complaint to DFI – Concerning Warrenpoint Harbour Authority.
- Correspondence from an Individual providing a briefing note addressing what is described as several governance and structural issues relevant to Northern Ireland's decarbonisation pathway.
- The ISNI Delivery Tracking System (DTS) report dated 29 March.
- The Youth Assembly - March 2026 Update.

- Correspondence from the Department, dated 18 March, regarding the launch on 26 March of the 6 week Defra-led UK wide Consultation on proposals for reform to the Packaging Recycling Note (PRN) system.
- Correspondence from the Department, dated 18 March, regarding the Amendment of the Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme Auctioning Regulations 2021.
- The report on the Joint Fisheries Statement, dated March 2026, covering the period November 2022 to November 2025.
- The 61st ESR Report dated 19 March which contains no SRs of relevance to the Committee.
- Correspondence the Committee has been copied into between the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee and Defra regarding Amending Regulation 1308/2013 - School Fruit, Vegetables and Milk Scheme.
- Notification of the forthcoming launch of Rural Action and partners Irish Rural Link and Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network new PEACEPLUS Maximising Community Space project.
- Correspondence that the Committee has been copied into from an individual, dated 23 March, regarding a Complaint Concerning NIEA's Regulatory Oversight of Re Gen Waste Ltd Facilities.
- The BH Estates Report on Farm2Export Ammonia.
- Correspondence from the Department, dated 14 April, regarding the launch on 20 April of the 12 week NI Waste Prevention Programme Consultation.

The Committee considered the following correspondence:

Correspondence from the Department, dated 27 March, providing an update on departmental funding for council-delivered non-farmed animal welfare enforcement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request clarification of the rationale for its decision and if the Department intends to make any future funding bids.

A memo from the Clerk to the Committee for the Executive Office, dated 25 March, regarding the implementation of the Armed Forces Covenant.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to CfEO to inform them that the AERA Committee are not undertaking any work in relation to the Armed Forces Covenant. A memo from the Clerk to the Committee for the Executive Office, dated 25 March, regarding Ending Violence Against Women and Girls.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward to CfEO the response to its previous request for information on the matter from the Department, dated 25 April 2025.

17. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

18. Any Other Business

A Member raised the issue of rising fuel prices and the disproportionate effects on Rural communities and the farming and fishing sectors.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister and the Secretary of State to make representations on the matter and highlight the Committee's support for efforts to alleviate the impact on rural communities and the agriculture and fishing sectors.

The Committee moved to agenda item 10

10. Departmental Oral Evidence Session - Update on the Crisis Framework

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Richard Johnston – Director, Agricultural Policy Division; and
- George Moffett – Deputy Director Agricultural Policy Division; and

The Committee heard details on the Policy proposals for a Crisis Framework within the Sustainable Agriculture Programme.

The Committee heard the Crisis Framework will provide a structured, pre-defined approach to assess the need for government intervention following the identification of a crisis due to more extreme events impacting the agriculture sector.

The Framework will enable the Department to assess risks quickly and determine the most appropriate measures to stabilise the industry to ensure timely, consistent, and effective responses.

A question and answer session followed.

The Committee heard that the Framework will be bespoke to Northern Ireland with different UK regions creating their own frameworks.

Officials advised the current process is to be reactive as and when a crisis arise and the purpose of the Framework is to horizon scan to be prepared when a crisis arises in order to respond quickly.

Members raised concerns that the agri food sector is most exposed due to extreme weather and rising fuel prices and highlighted the need to keep the Farm Sustainability Payment in place in addition to the proposed framework.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

The Officials left the meeting at 1:36pm

19. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 21 April at 10:00am in the Senate Chamber

The meeting was adjourned at 1:37pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated