



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

1 May 2025

Parliament Buildings, Room 21

Present: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
William Irwin MLA
Patsy McGlone MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA

Via Zoom: Aoife Finnegan MLA
Áine Murphy MLA

Apologies: Tom Buchanan MLA

In Attendance: Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk
Mr Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk
Mr Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor
Ms Sarah Preece, Clerical Officer

The Meeting Opened in Public Session at 10:07am

1. Apologies

Tom Buchanan MLA

2. Declaration of Interests

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

None were declared.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chair referred to correspondence from the Chair of the Committee for the Economy regarding joining the planned informal engagement session with Young Farmers at the Balmoral Show, after the main Committee meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to send a memo back to the Economy Committee describing the informal event and inviting Members of that Committee to be in attendance if they wish.

The Chair referred to a Clerk's Memo, dated 11 April, from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy regarding the response from Ofcom.

The Committee noted the response provides clarification in advance of the concurrent session on 28 May on the provision of telecommunications and mobile coverage in Northern Ireland; Ofcom's role in Service Level Agreements between Openreach and Communications Providers; and Ofcom's resilience policies.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the response.

The Chair referred to an invitation, from the Northern Ireland Sheep Industry Taskforce to attend a meeting on 1st July as part of the National Sheep Association's Sheep Event at the McFarlane Family Farm, Dungiven, on the future of the sheep sector support in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the invitation.

The Chair referred to an invitation, dated 18 April, from the Nature Friendly Farm Network to visit a local Nature Friendly Farm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the invitation and also noted that this was already on the list of potential visits in the Forward Work Plan.

The Chair referred to correspondence, dated 17 April, from the Woodlands Trust requesting the opportunity to brief the Committee on the findings and recommendations in its State of Woods and Trees Report due to be launched on Tuesday 14 October 2025 in the Long Gallery.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the request to the Forward Work Plan.

The Chair referred to the restricted legal advice from the Assembly's Legal Services, which the Committee requested following its meeting on 24 March as part of its due diligence on fair farm prices.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the legal advice in closed session, at the next meeting.

The Chair referred to a press release from Defra stating that Baroness Minette Batters – a Former NFU President and a farmer – has been appointed to lead a Farm Profitability Review.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the press release.

The Chair referred to an invitation to a guest lecture on 26 May at 6.30pm in the Great Hall at Queen's, to be given by Professor Ermias Kebreab of University of California Davis entitled "Methane - The Real Story". The lecture is being organised as part of the UK Dairy Carbon Network project.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the invitation.

The Chair referred to an invitation to join AgriSearch on Thursday 15th May at 7.30am in the Members Pavilion, Balmoral for a breakfast event "The Last Mile: Where Research Meets Results".

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the invitation.

The Chair referred to correspondence, dated 18 April, from the Warrenpoint Community Association, also sent to Minister Muir and to the OEP, raising concerns over what they believe to be breaches of waste management regulations at the Warrenpoint Harbour Authority, in relation to Re-Gen's waste management operations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Minister Muir to request that it be copied into any response made by him to the issues raised by the Warrenpoint Community Association.

The Chair referred to a response dated 29 April from the Minister with an update on the Wildfires.

The Committee noted that the Minister intends to bring forward to the Executive shortly the Strategic Way Forward for Wildfires, that will set out recommendations for the future direction of the management of Northern Ireland's wildfires.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the response.

John Blair MLA joined the meeting at 10:12am

4. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting on 10 April were agreed and signed by the Chair to be published.

Agreed: The Minutes were agreed.

5. Matters Arising

5.1 The Committee considered the response, dated 11 April, from the Department providing a summary 'ready reference' table of the 37 actions in the Lough Neagh Plan with an update on progress on each one - 10 are delivered, 23 are progressing and four yet to be progressed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence for future reference and write to the Department to request that it receives updates on the progress via updated versions of the tables.

5.2 The Committee considered a response, dated 15 April, from the HMRC regarding tax implications on payments to farmers arising from the Farming for Sustainability Knowledge Transfer Payment Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

HMRC's view is that both payments (Hosting and Learner) are likely to be taxable and so should be included in the farm's usual tax return as a trading receipt.

Agreed. The Committee agreed to note correspondence.

5.3 The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 23 April, following the Committees request for an update on all of DAERA's input to Defra on the development of the fair dealings regulations and on any connected matters.

The Committee noted the updates provided on: the 'fair dealing' regulations; The Groceries Code Adjudicator (GCA) and Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator (ASCA); EFRA Committee Inquiry; and The Private Members' Bill The 'Food Products (Market Regulation and Public Procurement) introduced in Westminster on 19 March by Mr Alistair Carmichael MP.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

5.4 The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 23 April to its request for formal update on the review of Arm's Length Bodies (ALBs).

The Committee noted the following:

- AFBI - a review has been undertaken in 2024 and is currently under consideration.
- NI Fishery Harbour Authority - the draft review report is currently going through an accuracy-check before being finalised.
- The Livestock and Meat Commission for Northern Ireland - a review is planned in 2025/26.
- The Loughs Agency - as a North South body it is not in scope for standard reviews but was last reviewed in 2008.
- The Agricultural Wages Board – not subject to full, independent reviews and a light-touch review to establish is planned for 2026/27.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the update.

5.5 The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 25 April, regarding: Budget 2025/26 – Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.

The response stated that the TEO Delivery Action Plan for 2024-2026 has two specific action points relevant to DAERA and officials have been engaging with TEO to progress both actions and create an e-learning package for NICS staff.

No specific funding has been requested to support these actions but the Minister is content to consider bids, subject to available funds.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the response.

5.6 The Committee considered correspondence from Sawgrass Substrates Ltd, dated 15 April, in response to its letter of 3 April regarding the odour complaint from the Cabragh Concerned Resident Association (CCRA).

The Committee considered the substantial response and that the odour is inherent due to the nature of the business of processing organic materials but that no

enforcement notices have been issued following investigations by NIEA. Sawgrass also state they continue to invest in upgrades to existing odour reduction processes and have regular engagements with NIEA, the PHA and the Mid Ulster District Council Environmental Health Department.

A Committee Member expressed the view that the situation was having a serious impact on the local community.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Sawgrass seeking consent to share its response with CCRA.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek information from the NIEA on how it has been tackling the complaints, investigating the apparent odour and to request a full update on the work to date and any anticipated work going forward.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Mid Ulster District Council to request any details which it may hold in relation to the issues raised.

5.7 The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 28 April, to its request for updates on the progress of the draft 3rd Cycle River Basin Management Plan (RBMP); and implementing the recommendations from the NIAO Report on Water Quality in Northern Ireland's Rivers and Lakes.

The Committee noted the Minister has approved the 3rd cycle RBMP and it has been submitted to the Executive for consideration, as it is crosscutting.

The Committee noted the update on the progress of implementing the recommendations from the NIAO Report was an issue raised by the Committee in connection with a potential focused piece of work and would return to the matter at a later date.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the response.

Michelle McIlveen MLA left the meeting at 10:20am

Michelle McIlveen MLA re-joined the meeting at 10:22am

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:25am

6. Oral briefing from the Department in relation to the Food Strategy Framework Action Plan.

The following DAERA Officials briefed the Committee

- Alison Chambers, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Development Division, DAERA;
- Joy Alexander, Deputy Director Sustainable Agri Food Development Division, DAERA
- Fiona Ferguson, Head of Food Strategy Policy, DAERA

The Committee heard that the Action Plan has been developed collaboratively across departments and other public sector partners, including the Food Standards Agency NI and Invest NI, recognising the interconnectedness of social, health, economic and environmental matters relating to food.

The Committee heard that the Action Plan has been structured around three missions to:

- Use food to improve lifelong health and wellbeing;
- Support environmentally sustainable, safe and ethical agri-food supply chains; and
- Further develop sustainable economic prosperity within the agri-food sector.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee raised issues around food waste; change of behaviours being needed; food poverty; food security and finding a balance between increasing food production and processing in a sustainable way.

The Chair thanked Officials for their attendance.

John Blair MLA left the meeting at 10:59am

John Blair MLA re-joined the meeting at 11:05am

Patsy McGlone MLA left the meeting at 11:06am

Patsy McGlone MLA re-joined the meeting at 11:14am

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11:12 am

The NISA representatives joined the meeting at 11:13am

7. Oral briefing from the NI Shows Association (NISA)

The following representatives briefed the Committee

- Brian Lockhart – Chairman of NISA
- Rhonda Geary, Group Operations Director, NISA
- Marjorie Blackburn – NISA member

The Committee were briefed on the contents of the NISA 2022 Report titled: Independent Resilience Review of Agricultural Shows in Northern Ireland.

The Committee heard that Agricultural Shows in Northern Ireland are at a disadvantage to those in the Republic of Ireland and GB in that Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK that has no or limited financial support from government, which threatens the future of the Shows.

The Committee heard that the Shows bring significant local economic and social benefits and that the level of support for the Shows can vary significantly across Local Authorities and believed that a more consistent approach to councils' engagement and financial support for NISA would be beneficial.

There then followed a question and answer session:

The Committee queried the extent of follow-up from various relevant Departments on the Report and also highlighted that that the Shows are well placed to support DAERA's objectives in the three missions in the NI Food Strategy Framework Action Plan.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to DAERA, Department for Communities and the Department for the Economy to encourage them to re-engage with NISA and consider financial support for its programme of work.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to SOLACE to encourage it to provide financial support from councils to the NISA's programme of work and to consider

how a more consistent approach to engagement with NISA and representation of councils at the Shows may be achieved.

The representatives left the meeting at 11:54 am

The meeting was suspended at 11:55am

The meeting resumed at 12:07am

8. Agriculture Bill - Committee Deliberations (Informal Clause by Clause)

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The following Departmental Officials were in attendance:

- John Terrington – Head of Agri-Food Legislation Branch; and
- Elaine McCrory – Head of Supply Chain Transition Team.

The Chair advised that this session would be an informal Clause by Clause to allow all Members to ask any last questions of the Officials before summarising their position prior to the formal Clause by Clause on 8th May.

The Committee considered a memo received from the Clerk to the Committee for the Executive Office, in response to its letter to all Statutory Committees, stating that the provisions of the Agriculture Bill have no direct impact on the functions of TEO.

The Committee considered correspondence from NIMGA regarding the substrate yard previously owned by Northway Mushrooms. It clarified Sawgrass Substrates Ltd is not a PO, is not a member of NIMGA and does not participate in the Fruit and Vegetable Aid Scheme.

Clause 1 Aid in the fruit and vegetables sector: amendment of CMO Regulation.

The Chair stated the content of Clause 1 and summarised the discussions at the last meeting on 10 April.

The Officials stated that it changes the funding to discretionary and does not give the power to close the scheme.

There then followed a questions and answer session with Officials.

A Member asked what would happen if the Bill did not go ahead. In response the Officials stated the scheme would continue as it is and there would be a risk that funds could be used for the benefit of non NI growers with an added pressure on the budget. There would also be no scope to change the current scheme to make improvements in advance of a new scheme. Members then summarised their positions on Clause 1.

Clause 2 - Aid in the fruit and vegetables sector: power to modify.

The Chair stated the content of Clause 2 and summarised the discussions at the last meeting on 10 April.

The Officials clarified that the powers could be used to make incremental improvements to the current scheme prior to the introduction of any replacement scheme.

The Committee had no further questions regarding Clause 2 and Members then summarised their positions on Clause 2.

Clause 3 - Information provision and promotion measures: power to modify.

The Chair stated the content of Clause 3 and summarised the discussions at the last meeting on 10 April.

The Committee had no further questions regarding Clause 3 and Members then summarised their positions on Clause 3.

Clause 4 – Regulations

The Chair stated the content of Clause 4 and summarised the discussions at the last meeting on 10 April.

The Committee had no further questions regarding Clause 4 and Members then summarised their position on Clause 4.

Clause 5 – Interpretation

The Chair stated the content Clause 5 and summarised the Committee discussions at the last meeting on 10 April.

The Committee had no further questions regarding Clause 5 and Members then summarised their positions on Clause 5.

Clause 6 – Commencement and short title

The Chair reminded Members that at the last meeting on 10 April, it had a closed deliberations session with the Bill Office and considered the possibility of requesting an amendment to the Short Title to provide clarity for the reader, as some Members felt that the current title is not reflective of the Bill's content.

The Chair then sought and received Committee agreement to go into closed session to further discuss Clause 6.

The Officials left the meeting at 12.31pm

The meeting went into closed session at 12:32pm

9. Agriculture Bill Committee Deliberations (Closed Session)

The meeting resumed in public session at 12:43 pm

Clause 6 – Commencement and short title

The Chair stated for the record that following the advice given by the Assembly Bill Official the Committee will not be seeking an amendment to the Short Title as it would very likely be inadmissible.

10. The Farming with Nature Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and Policy Proposals for the Farming with Nature Package.

The Committee noted that at the meeting on 10th April it received an oral briefing from the Department and heard that it intends to make a Statutory Rule to introduce The Farming with Nature Regulations to provide DAERA with the legal powers to implement the Farming with Nature (FwN) Package as part of the continued roll out of the Sustainable Agricultural Programme.

The Chair stated that the Clerk was advised by the Examiner of Statutory Rules that there were drafting errors in the draft SR and therefore the consideration of the draft SR is postponed until the next meeting until a corrected version is received.

The Committee considered the response it received from DAERA to its letter requesting further clarification on a number of matters regarding the FwN Package.

The response stated that:

- Since the outset of the development of a farm policy in 2018 to replace the EU funded CAP it has been the intention that environmental farming schemes would form part of a farm support package and it was formally named as the FwN Package in 2021; and
- Article 13 provides the powers to move funds between relevant schemes, including schemes under the FwN Package and there has been no discussions to date to remove the 'voluntary' element of the scheme.

Agreed: The Committee noted the correspondence.

The Chair sought agreement to proceed to Agenda item 12 first and then return to Agenda Item 11 - Members agreed.

12. Correspondence.

12.1 The Committee considered the correspondence memo

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note

12.2 The Committee considered the 37th Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules and noted the Report does not contain any SRs of relevance to this Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the Report

12.3 The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 14 April, regarding the publication of the TB Partnership Steering Group's (TBPSG) 'Bovine Tuberculosis in Northern Ireland: Blueprint for Eradication'.

The Committee noted that the aim of the TBPSG is to work with DAERA to reduce bTB herd incidence by 2% by 2030, to halve current bTB levels by 2040, and achieve eradication by 2050. The Department recognises that some actions will require further policy development, and new or amending legislation.

A Member raised concerns that the targets were not ambitious enough and that there was a need for more urgency and another expressed concern that there was a lack of clarity regarding the issue of wildlife.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence and return to it a later date.

12.4 The Committee considered the 2023 Waterways Ireland Annual Report and Accounts 2023

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the Report.

12.5 The Committee considered a series of emails that the Committee has been copied into between Macwaste Ltd and the NIEA Waste Regulation Unit regarding a Haz waste query.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence and keep a watching brief on the matter.

12.6 The Committee considered the Northern Ireland Executive Brussels Office Report for January – March 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the report.

12.7 The Committee considered the ISNI Delivery Tracking System - Investing Activity Report, dated 27 April 2025, that collates up-to-date information on the status of projects and their underlying investing activities.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the report.

12.8 The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 29 April, regarding the launch on 1st May of an eight week public consultation on The Revised Nutrients Action Programme 2026 - 2029 Consultation.

The Committee heard that Officials will provide an oral briefing on the proposals and an outline of the recent NAP review at the Committee meeting on 8 May.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee returned to Agenda item 11

11. Research and Information Service (RaISe) Briefing on Public Estate Value to Society

The following RaISe officials were in attendance:

- Mark Allen, Research Officer, NIA Research Office
- Charlotte Hodges, UKRI Student Research Officer, NIA Research Office

The Committee were briefed on the RaISe Paper commissioned by it, entitled 'Public Estate and its Value to Society', which examines the approach to valuation of public land assets, such as the public estate, within Northern Ireland.

The Committee heard that in Northern Ireland the Environmental Improvement Plan commits to adopting a natural capital approach, which is assessed by considering the extent and quality of natural resources and the services that flow from them which are of benefit to people. The Committee also heard that natural capital methods can also highlight the health, education and wellbeing value of public land assets.

There then followed a question and answer session

The Chair thanked the RaISe officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the research paper with the Department and seek a response to the queries highlighted in the paper.

William Irwin MLA left the meeting at 12.42pm

The RaISe officials left the meeting at 1.11pm

13. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

A Committee Member requested consideration of a briefing from Lough Neagh Fisheries on 22nd May to coincide with the Departmental briefing on the SL1 Eel Fishing Regulations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to that briefing and to publish the Forward Work Plan.

14. Any Other Business

None.

15. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on **Thursday 8th May at 10.00am in Parliament Buildings.**

The meeting was adjourned at 1:14pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated