



Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

22 January 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
Áine Murphy MLA
Daniel McCrossan MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA

Via Zoom: Gareth Wilson MLA

In Attendance: Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk
Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk
Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor
Kyle Lawlor, Clerical Officer

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:12am

1. Apologies

None

2. Declaration of Interests

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

None were declared.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to the Draft Statutory Instrument (SI) The Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) Order 2026 as discussed at the previous meeting and provided a summary of the briefing from Officials at the meeting of 15 January.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to support the SI as drafted in the debate in the Assembly.

The Chairperson referred to an invitation to the official launch of the RiSE Programme designed to enhance the social enterprise ecosystem across rural areas, providing training and support to organisations at 10:30am on 4 February at An Creagán, Omagh.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 19 January, from an individual regarding an allegation of pollution release at the River Ridge Site on Craigmore Road on 18 January.

The Committee noted it has been previously made aware of complaints of odours and waste management at various sites and has raised the issues directly with NIEA and councils.

The Committee noted that NIEA previously advised that before it reviewed its own guidance on odour management it was awaiting the completion of the UK Environment Agency (UKEA) review of its “H4 Odour Management” guidance. The Committee was made aware by the Chair that the H4 guidance has now been withdrawn by the UKEA as its review and new guidance has been completed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the NIEA to encourage it to progress with its own review on odour management and update the Committee accordingly.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 19 January, from an individual regarding the Impact of veterinary medicine supply restrictions.

The Committee noted the correspondence expressed concern at the impact that the restrictions are having on animal welfare due to higher costs and reduced access to essential medicine and urges action to alleviate the situation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note as part of its wider evidence on this matter.

The Chairperson referred to the oral statement the Minister made on Tuesday to the Assembly regarding the launch of the draft Northern Ireland Nature Recovery Strategy for consultation.

The Committee noted it had considered the NIEA Business Plan 2025-26 on 11 September noting that Nature Recovery is one of its three key priorities.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the statement.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 20 January, from the Minister regarding Images and video footage passed to the DAERA relating to allegations made concerning practices at the AFBI Hillsborough site.

The Committee noted the Department was already aware and that inspections by both NIEA and DAERA's Veterinary Service and Animal Health Group found that there were no major issues of concern.

The Committee also noted an independent inspection of the site by Red Tractor, which provides accreditation for farm standards noted some minor issues, which have since been addressed and accreditation status was maintained.

The Committee noted that officials from AFBI are due to brief the Committee on the recent data breach at the next meeting providing an opportunity for Members to raise further queries relating to the allegations if required.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that Members would notify the clerk by close of business on 23 January if they had any queries, they wish to raise with AFBI Officials at the next meeting.

The Chairperson advised the Committee that the Minister met with him and the Deputy Chair for a brief informal meeting in relation to the oral statement he made to the Assembly regarding the consultation on the draft Nature Recovery Strategy.

The Committee noted that a range of connected matters were discussed at that meeting, including the full list of relevant policies listed in the Strategy and the Minister's confirmation that the links between them all are actively being considered. Other matters discussed included chicken litter and Shared Environmental Services.

The Chairperson raised the matter of Anaerobic Digestors (AD) as being an important part in the efforts towards nature recovery and suggested holding a formal evidence session bringing in a wider range of AD owners and operators.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to make arrangements to hold an evidence session with AD operators.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 15 January 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered the response, dated 15 January, from the Minister in reply to a query raised during his briefing on 4 December regarding transboundary air quality assessments and Shared Environmental Services (SES).

The Committee noted although each jurisdiction is responsible for its own procedures and conservation, officials are working with the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) and counterparts on the UK and the Republic of Ireland to increase consistency of air quality assessment approaches.

The Committee also noted, in relation to difficulties regarding transboundary consultations NIEA has written SES to encourage it to proceed to complete its Habitat Regulations Assessment based on the information it has available.

A Member raised concerns at the lack of engagement between the National Parks and Wildlife Service and DAERA to resolve any barriers towards the export of chicken litter from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the National Parks and Wildlife Service to request that efforts are made to engage with DAERA to address the issues impeding the export of chicken litter to the Republic of Ireland.

The Committee considered a response, dated 12 January, from the Department regarding an Update on DAERA Planning Performance and the backlog of consultations.

The Committee noted the oldest backlog cases are complex non-statutory consultations associated with large scale major renewable energy schemes and that additional resource has been allocated to the address the backlog and further resource will come from the ongoing recruitment competitions.

A Member requested that any future correspondence from the Department on the matter should also include specific reference to delays to the green energy sector.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a council by council breakdown of the backlog.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 3 January, from Defra's Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD) regarding Veterinary Medicines Supply in Northern Ireland, in response to concerns raised at the briefing from the North of Ireland Veterinary Association (NIVA) on 27 November.

The Committee noted that the response stated there are currently no indications there will be supply issues and that several pharmaceutical companies have committed not to raise prices at the end of the grace period.

The Committee also noted there are schemes now in place to assist with the continued supply of veterinary products and VMD will continue to engage with stakeholders across the supply chain continue to assess and monitor the situation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the correspondence to the NIVA and the British Veterinary Association (BVA) and request they provide the Committee with their up to date assessment of the situation since the end of the grace period.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 19 January, it has been copied into, between the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee and the Minister for the Cabinet office regarding the supply of veterinary medicines.

The Committee noted the correspondence responds to queries raised by the Scrutiny Committee and states that there has been no significant impact on the supply since the end of the grace period on 1 January.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A Member raised the potential impact on the agri food industry considering possible redundancies at ABP Linden Foods, Dungannon and suggested that the Committee request that DAERA engages directly with the company on the matter.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request that it engages directly with ABP Linden Foods regarding any support it may be able to offer those affected.

The meeting was suspended at 10:31am

The meeting resumed at 10:37am

The NILGA and BCNI representatives joined the meeting at 10:37am

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

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

From NILGA:

- Cllr Billy Webb, President;
- Cllr Matt Garrett, Vice President;
- Cllr Aaron Callan, Executive Member.

From BCNI:

- Mr Tom Lavery, Chair of BCNI - Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council;
- Mr Ian Harper, Building Control Manager - Belfast City Council.

The Committee heard that NILGA broadly welcomes the intent of the Bill but has concerns about how it will work in practice. Concerns highlighted included: the discretionary element; lack of financial resources to deal with costly civil actions to recover costs which would not be covered by penalties; the issue of managing high

public expectations of what councils can deliver; and penalties are considered too low to act as a sufficient deterrent.

The Committee also heard that issues of land banking and how to manage the public interest with private rights will require clear and robust guidance and operational procedures.

A question and answer session followed.

In response to a Member's query regarding consistency of approach between councils, representatives advised that although this would be welcome it was not possible at present due to councils having different resource levels as they have differing levels of rate payer base funding.

The Committee heard that councils are keen to work with DAERA and would welcome further conversations to discuss how to improve the Bill as they do not believe the Bill is a workable piece of legislation as it currently stands.

Members expressed concerns regarding funding available to councils, lack of councils' consistency of approach, and the potential for rural disparity. Members also suggested that as councils will be the main delivery partner, DAERA should re engage with them as a matter of urgency to discuss ways to address issues raised.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to move forward with round table discussions with councils to address issues raised at the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request that they advise the Committee by 2nd February what amendments to the Bill are being considered and to enquire further details on the Rural Impact Assessment, considering the potential for rural disparity.

The NILGA and BCNI representatives left the meeting at 11:29am

The Committee agreed to move to Agenda 14

The Departmental officials joined the meeting at 11:33am

14. Second Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) on the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Bill (BBNJ).

This item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted on 11 December, it agreed to support the Minister in seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the LCM for the BBNJ Bill which was then supported by the Assembly on 12 January.

The Committee also noted that at the House of Lords Report Stage on 12 January, the UK Government secured agreement to a series of amendments, inserting six new clauses into the Bill and consequently, the Department has laid a revised legislative consent memorandum and a second legislative consent motion from the same Bill.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Colin Armstrong - Deputy Director of Marine and Fisheries Policy and Legislation
- Stephanie Bennett - Head of Marine Licensing Branch.

The Committee heard the debate in the Assembly is scheduled for 26 January to coincide with the other UK Parliaments and that Royal assent is expected to be given in the first week in February.

The Committee heard the amendments will strengthen the powers of Assembly scrutiny as it will provide concurrent powers plus a statutory consulting mechanism for devolved matters that were not included in the original LCM.

The Committee also heard that the amendments are more of interest to Scotland due to its location and its larger marine area as the Northern Ireland marine area is not as extensive. However, the framework will be in place to make regulations in Northern Ireland if needed.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to support the subsequent LCM at the debate in the Assembly.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11:40am

The meeting was suspended at 11:40am

The meeting resumed at 11:49am

John Blair MLA rejoined the meeting at 11:55am

Tom Buchanan MLA rejoined the meeting at 11:53am

The RaISe official joined the meeting at 11:49am

The Committee moved to Agenda item 7

7. Assembly Research Service (RaISe) Oral Briefing - US Trade Tariffs: Key changes & initial considerations for Northern Ireland

The following RaISe official briefed the Committee:

- Aidan Stennett

The Committee were briefed on the RaISe Papers it commissioned, outlining the proposed and actual key changes to US trade tariff policy since January 2025 and the potential impact of these tariffs on the agriculture industry in Northern Ireland.

The Committee heard that uncertainty generated by the threat of tariffs is detrimental to industry.

The Committee also heard that the value of Northern Ireland exports to the US in the 12 months between Quarter 4, 2024 to Quarter 3, 2025 fell by £0.53 billion compared to the 12 months between Quarter 4, 2023, to Quarter 3 2024 which was the largest decrease in value of any partner country in the same period.

The Chair thanked the RaISe official for his attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to both DAERA and the Department of Economy to seek its assessment of the tariffs imposed since June 2025 and any impact this has had on the agriculture sector In Northern Ireland; and the Departments' knowledge of the impact of the £0.53 billion fall in the value of Northern Ireland agricultural exports to the United States.

The RaISe official left the meeting at 12:05pm

Aoife Finnegan MLA left the meeting at 12:08pm

8. SL1 The Sheep Carcase Classification and Price Reporting Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee noted this SL1 is the first to this Committee to be subject to a new process introduced in the Assembly on 5 January, designed to strengthen committee scrutiny of delegated legislation.

The Committee noted a standard call for views survey will now be issued for each SL1 that comes before it, containing three survey questions: Is the information provided by the Department in relation to the proposed statutory rule accurate?; Is the information provided by the Department in relation to the proposed statutory rule complete?; and Do you foresee any unintended or unanticipated consequences of implementing this statutory rule?

The Committee agreed general matters that will apply to all SL1s:

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue a call for views for each SL1 that comes before it, using the standard survey, and to publish the SL1, the draft SR and any relevant documents from the Department on the Committee website.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that committee staff seek information from the Department, where necessary, on any matters raised during each SL1 stage, including in the survey and that all information provided by the department will be provided to the committee to inform its decision-making on the proposal.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to publish any responses received to the Committee survey for each SL1, after the Committee has considered them.

The Committee then considered the SL1 The Sheep Carcase Classification and Price Reporting Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

The Committee noted that the Department intends to make the SR under the draft affirmative procedure to introduce mandatory sheep carcase classification and price reporting in Northern Ireland.

The Committee also noted the SR will make classification of sheep carcases aged less than 12 months and price reporting of the same mandatory in Northern Ireland

for all slaughterhouses which slaughter at least 1,000 sheep per week as a rolling annual average.

The Committee noted officials are scheduled to brief the Committee on the SR on 26 February 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.

The Committee noted it would not consider the policy detail of the SL1 until it has conducted and analysed responses to the Citizen Space survey and been briefed by Officials the meeting on 26 February.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note receipt of the SL1 and proposed statutory rule and that these will be published as part of the call for views on the proposal.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the policy detail of the SL1 at the meeting on 26 February, 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.

9. Departmental Written Briefing - Consultation on Rethinking Our Resources: the NI Resources and Waste Management Strategy.

The Committee considered the briefing paper outlining the rationale for the draft strategy and noted the consultation launched on 15 January and will run for twelve weeks.

The Committee noted that the draft strategy builds on the 2019 Waste Management Plan and aims to transition Northern Ireland away from the linear model – of take, make, use and dispose – towards a low carbon circular approach of reduce, reuse, repair and recycle with landfill being the method of last resort and thereby contributing to Net Zero by 2050.

The Committee noted the strategy sets out 10 targets and 63 supporting actions in four parts: The Need for Change; Enabling Change and Empowering Action; Making it Happen; and Monitoring Progress.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to contact the Department to request that Officials provide an oral briefing on the Consultation as soon as possible.

Aine Murphy MLA rejoined the meeting at 12:12pm

10. Correspondence

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 14 January, it has been copied into between the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee and Defra regarding The Marking of Retail Goods Regulations 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a Clerk's memo dated 15 January from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding Scrutiny of the draft Multi-Year Budget for 2026-29/30 and requesting views on DAERA's 2026 - 29/30 Budget and any issues the Committee has about DAERA's 2025-26 Budget position and management by 27 February.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note and seek a briefing in advance of the deadline for its response.

The Committee considered a Clerk's memo, dated 16 January, from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy regarding Indexation Issues, including a copy of a response from the Department for the Economy on the matter.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 19 January, from the Youth Assembly Manager and a copy of The Big Youth Survey Report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a copy Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 20 January from CEF NI regarding its proposal for an Infrastructure Levy as a solution to the Wastewater issue.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

12. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

13. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 29 January at Room 21, Parliament Buildings at 10.00am.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:16pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated