



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

15 October 2026

Meeting location: Room 21 Parliament Buildings

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

Via Zoom: Áine Murphy MLA
Aoife Finnegan MLA until 10:21am then in person

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:05am

John Blair MLA joined the meeting at 10:06am

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, and as the owner and executor of a small farm business.

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

Áine Murphy MLA declared an interest in the Hunting with Dogs Bill as a licensed fire arms holder.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to an invitation from AFBI to a breakfast event on Thursday 5th November at 8am, in the Stormont Hotel to present the outcomes of AFBI's independent Peer Review and to highlight AFBI's scientific achievements and discuss future opportunities.

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

The Chairperson referred to a note of the informal meeting on 8 October between the Chairperson and representatives of NI Environment Link (NIEL) to discuss matters of mutual current interest.

The Chairperson stated that later that afternoon she, and the Deputy Chairperson if available, will meet informally with representatives from the Office of Environmental Protection (OEP).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to an informal meeting with Nigel Topping, the Chair of The Climate Change Committee (CCC), at 1pm on Monday 19 October in Room 30

and requested that Members would respond to the diary invitation to confirm attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the diary invitation to confirm attendance.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 8 October 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 8 October, regarding The Sea Fishing (Amendment) Regulations 2026.

The Committee noted on 17 September it had considered a written briefing providing an overview of Defra's proposal for a UK-wide Statutory Instrument (SI), The SI provides for amendments to assimilated law for recreational fishing for Pollack and had agreed to write to the Department requesting further information on the stakeholder engagement process.

The Committee noted the response provides details of the Department's engagement with the Northern Ireland Federation of Sea Anglers, the Ulster Angling Federation, the Northern Ireland Marine Task Force; and other vessel charterers and operators.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 6 October, regarding The Report on the Prevalence and Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) in Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted on 24 September it considered the report and agreed to write to the Department seeking comments on the report, particularly in relation to any implications for departmental policy, service delivery, or future work programmes.

The Committee noted the Department advised that the findings and in particular, the evidence relating to deprivation, place and community circumstances, will be considered, where relevant, in the development or review of Departmental policies, when considering service-delivery implications, and the shaping of research and work programmes.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a memo, dated 8 October, from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy regarding The Openreach Digital switchover.

The Committee noted the Economy Committee has declined a joint concurrent session owing to its heavy legislative forward work programme but would appreciate an update on the findings of the evidence session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that an evidence session with Openreach would be held on 12 November.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 12 October, regarding DAERA Timescales for collection of bTB positive animals.

The Committee noted that recent performance has been below the target of removal of 90% of bTB animals within 15 working days, with rates of 77% in May, 86% in June and 73% in July, but that the contractual four-day key performance indicator for removal, following authorisation, was achieved in the most recent reported quarter, April to June 2026.

The Committee noted the Department intends to train additional staff, is monitoring removal performance, and the factors contributing to delay. The operation of the valuation and removal process is being considered as part of the wider bTB Eradication Transformation Programme.

A Member expressed concern that the Department is currently underperforming against its target and needs to step up its efforts and that concerns regarding delays are being widely raised by the farming community.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 12 October, regarding a Framework for Resilience for the Fishing Sector in Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted on 1 October it considered the Department's response, dated 23 September, regarding the development of a Framework and expressed concerns about the apparent lack of urgency.

The Committee noted the Department has commenced a scoping exercise building on its existing understanding of the significant pressures facing the fishing industry to consider how existing challenges can be addressed and consider how a Fisheries Resilience Framework might complement existing support for the sector.

The Committee noted Officials are working towards completing the initial scoping exercise by the end of 2026 and, following Ministerial consideration, the Department will provide the Committee with a further update on progress.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee agreed to move to Agenda item 19 as an addition to the Agenda

19. Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 12 October, regarding the DAERA Review of the ANC payment scheme.

The Committee noted on 1 October it took oral evidence from the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association (NIMEA) and heard that the previous DAERA review of the ANC payments scheme stated that the scheme was not value for money and Committee had agreed to write to the Department to request a copy of the review and any associated papers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the review and the associated papers and to return to the matter during Committee deliberations on the Bill.

The Irish Working Terrier Federation (IWTF) representatives joined the meeting at 10:17am

Daniel McCrossan MLA joined the meeting at 10:47am

6. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Evidence Session with the Irish Working Terrier Federation (IWTF)

The Committee considered a response from the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC), dated 7 October, providing a rebuttal on the evidence regarding shooting presented by Dr Nick Fox on behalf of NoISE Coalition on 17 September.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to return to the matter during the Bill deliberations.

The Committee considered a request from the Concerned Residents Group of Artanagh, Shanrod and Fedney to give oral evidence on the Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to take oral evidence from Concerned Residents Group of Artanagh, Shanrod and Fedney, on 22 October, as farmers and residents affected by hunting.

The following IWTF representatives briefed the Committee:

- Owen Mulcahy - Founding Member and Secretary;
- John Phelan - Business Development Manager and Treasurer;
- Brian McCullough – Huntsman; and
- Steven McGonigal - Rural Pest Controller and Consultant.

The Committee heard the IWTF support effective enforcement of animal-welfare, wildlife protections, and accountability where standards are breached; however, the Bill should include an exception under Article 23D preserving legitimate terrier work for lawful wildlife-management, livestock-protection, conservation and animal-welfare purposes - drawing on the standards set out in the IWTF Code of Conduct.

The Committee also heard that if an injured animal is below ground, it may be inaccessible and therefore surface shooting alone would be insufficient and that any legislation brought forward should recognise this.

The Committee also heard views that the current legislation is sufficient to protect wildlife in Northern Ireland and that terrier work is a useful tool for a land management and control measures and alternative non-targeted methods such as traps and poison are not as humane.

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

- If the controlled use of terriers under the IWTF Code of Conduct leads to better welfare outcomes than either leaving an animal underground or relying only on surface-based methods;
- The distinction between using dogs in hunting for sport and using dogs for pest control;
- Potential issues arising in border areas due to differences in legislation in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland;
- Animal welfare concerns relating to alternative methods such as poison or traps;
- Concerns at the practicalities of land management and pest control activities with the Bill's two dog limit in larger farms and in areas with extensive or challenging terrain; and
- Whether new legislation is required to address organised activities that result in animal cruelty.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The Irish Working Terrier Federation (IWTF) representatives left the meeting at 11:00am

The Country Sports Ireland representatives joined the meeting at 11:01am

7. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Evidence Session with Country Sports Ireland

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The following Country Sports Ireland representatives briefed the Committee:

- Ronan Gorman, Chief Executive; and

- Sophie Smyth, Operations Manager.

The Committee heard that Country Sports Ireland cannot support the Bill, highlighting the role of well managed hunting in protecting livestock; conservation; pest control; social interaction and supporting the rural economy.

The Committee heard concerns that the two-dog rule would affect legitimate game hunting and may expose participants to criminal liability. Members also heard that it has generated a chill factor, particularly regarding the potential seizure of firearms as a result of malicious or unfounded allegations.

The Committee also heard concerns about the broad scope of the Bill and the lack of clear definitions for “hunting” and ‘participation’ and that terrier work is an important method of pest control.

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

- Concerns regarding unintended consequences, such as the potential criminalisation of dog walkers;
- Concerns at the practicalities of lawful land management; pest control and animal welfare with the two dog limit;
- The need for clearer definitions to be included in the Bill;
- The number of prosecutions for organised animal cruelty brought about by the PSNI;
- Concerns regarding the potential seizure of firearms as a result of malicious or unfounded allegations;
- Exemptions for game shooting similar to those found in Scottish legislation;
- Queries relating to the veracity of the high number of reports of animal cruelty made to the USPCA; and
- The absence of cases in other jurisdictions where a dog walker has been charged with an offence because their dog chased a wild mammal.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The Country Sports Ireland representatives left the meeting at 11:38am

The British Pest Control Association (BPCA) representative joined the meeting at 11:39am

8. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Evidence Session with British Pest Control Association (BPCA)

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following representative briefed the Committee:

- Rosina Robson, Chief Executive

The Committee heard that the BPCA supports legislation aimed improving animal welfare however, it does have some concerns regarding the Bill including potential unintended consequences.

In relation to terrier work, the Committee heard that the creation of a new offence appears unnecessary as the offence of hunting already prohibits the use of dogs below ground.

The Committee also heard the Bill does not clearly define “enclosed spaces” and risks affecting the ability of pest professionals using working dogs to flush animals from buildings, and that the use of traps and shooting is not as effective.

The Committee also heard that rabbits should be exempted alongside rats and mice, given their status as a recognised pest species that causes infrastructure and crop damage and carries disease.

In relation to trail hunting, the Committee heard that the definition should be replaced with that found in the Hunting With Dog Bill (Scotland) Act 2023.

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

- The adoption of the Scottish definition of trail hunting as laid out in the Hunting with Dogs Bill (Scotland) Act 2023;
- The animal welfare advantages from using detection dogs;
- Difficulties associated with the inclusion of a list of spaces defined as “enclosed”; and
- The need to exempt rabbits due to control issues in airports and surrounding areas.

The Chair thanked the representative for her attendance.

The BPCA representative left the meeting at 11:56am

The meeting was suspended at 11:56am

The meeting resumed at 12:04pm

The League Against Cruel Sports representatives joined the meeting at 12:04pm

Tom Buchanan MLA rejoined the meeting at 12:11pm

9. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Evidence Session with League Against Cruel Sports

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Emma Slawinski - CEO; and
- Robbie Marsland - Director, Scotland, and Northern Ireland

The Committee heard that LACS polling shows a majority of the Northern Ireland public would like to see a ban and that this is not a town versus country issue, with the polling showing a clear majority across all geographical breakdowns and there are large groups of farmers who do not want fox hunts on their land.

The Committee heard it does not consider the Bill to be too broad or vague and that the two dogs limit is sufficient, that fox hunting and underground “terrier work” are often forms of entertainment and sport rather than land management techniques, **and** that alternatives are available including drag hunting or clean boot hunting.

The Committee also heard that the “chill factor” expressed by those opposed to the Bill has been overstated and there have been no cases in England where a person walking their dog has been charged with an offence because their dog chased a wild mammal.

The Committee also heard that the USPCA has evidence that terrier work is used as a smokescreen for illegal badger baiting, what it describes as underground dog fighting; and that trail hunting is widely acknowledged to be a cover for illegal fox hunting.

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

- If alternative methods to terrier work such as snaring are less humane;
- Issues with pest control in larger buildings such as hospitals;
- The possible merits of including an exemption for rabbits;

- If the Bill would benefit from a clearer definition of enclosed spaces;
- Possible negative impact of unintended consequences of the Bill on rural communities and rural way of life;
- Public support and geographical breakdown for those supporting a ban on hunting with dogs;
- Engagement the League has had with land managers, farmers and other stakeholders; and
- Animal welfare issues associated with the two dogs limit, especially in vast areas or challenging terrain.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The League Against Cruel Sports representatives left the meeting at 1:05pm

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 1:06pm

Daniel McCrossan MLA left the meeting at 1:35pm

10. Oral Briefing from the Department – The Climate Change (Carbon Budget 2038-2042) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

This item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted that the SR is subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure and at the meeting on 17 September it agreed to issue a Call for Views using the Citizen Space platform, which received no responses and to receive an oral briefing from Officials today.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Anthony Courtney - Acting Director, CCLPD;
- John Early - Deputy Director, CCLPD; and
- Ian Fleming - Head of Carbon Budgets & Just Transition Commission Regulations Branch.

The Committee heard the purpose of the SR under powers conferred by section 23 of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 is to set the level of the Fourth Carbon Budget (2038-2042), which is intended to provide a mechanism of ensuring

that emissions can be reduced in a gradual way which allows for a fair and just transition.

The Committee heard the costs are estimated over the entire period from 2025 to 2050 to reach net zero, is £3.56 billion but is estimated to produce a total benefit of £4.95 billion over the same period providing a net benefit of £1.39 billion

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

- Implications for food security and food production if livestock reductions are implemented as advised by the Climate Change Committee (CCC);
- If assurance can be provided that there will be no future reduction in livestock;
- Concerns at impact of the measures across all sectors and in particular farmers and the rural community;
- If there will be assurances that farmers will get sufficient support from the Just Transition Fund for Agriculture;
- The need for the Department to take account of the work farmers have already undertaken in terms of carbon sequestration;
- Concern that there is no detail on what policies will be needed; the associated costs involved; how it will be funded; and the possibility of litigation if targets are not met; and
- The Department's engagement with stakeholders.

The Committee were divided in support of the draft SR. A quorum was present and a vote was taken.

The Committee divided: **AYES 4 : NOES 4.**

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

Noes: Diana Armstrong MLA, Tom Buchanan MLA, Michelle McIlveen MLA, Gareth Wilson MLA

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was not content to support the draft SR and that the Chairperson would reflect the views of the Committee in her speech in the Assembly debate.

A Member expressed concern that any funding should not come out of the ring fenced budget and that there should be an accurate audit to ensure that efforts farmers have taken to increase carbon sequestration is considered.

11. SL1 The Farm Sustainability Payment Scheme (Eligibility Etc) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 – noting stage.

The Committee noted the purpose of the draft SR, which is subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure, is to provide DAERA with the legal powers to introduce:

- Participation in the Carbon Footprinting Project as a conditionality for the Farm Sustainability Payment (FSP) with effect from 1 January 2027;
- Amend the Direct Payments Regulation to align the maximum Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) content of hemp varieties eligible for direct payments with that for hemp imports from third countries; and
- Amend Article 15(2) of Commission Implementing Regulation 809/2014 to reflect the decision to disapply late field claim penalties going forward. This will enable applicants to amend their FSP applications up to the closing date of 9 June without penalty.

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

A Member raised concerns on conditions being placed on payments and asked what steps could be taken to ensure that Calls for Views could be better advertised.

The Member also requested that Officials should come before the Committee in advance of the briefing on 12 November to clarify what is expected from farmers and if will they be penalised if they have a low carbon score.

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 necessary at this stage and this to be arranged.

12. SL1 - The Rural Needs Act (Public Authorities) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 – Noting Stage

The Committee noted the purpose of the draft SR, subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure, is to review the list of bodies and persons set out in the Schedule at least every three years and the power to add, remove or modify any entries that it thinks appropriate.

It will also amend the Schedule by the inclusion of 54 additional public authorities, increasing the number listed from 37 to 91 and is the first amendment to the Schedule since the Act came into operation in 2016.

The Committee noted that the Climate Commissioner's Office is not on the list.

The Committee noted that Officials are scheduled to brief the Committee on the SR on 10 December.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note receipt of the SL1 and draft 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 10 December, when it will be briefed by Officials after the Committee has conducted and analysed responses to its Citizen Space survey.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the policy detail on 10 December but write to the Department in the meantime to ask why Climate Commissioner's Office is not on the list.

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

13. The Welfare of Animals (Supply of Puppies and Kittens) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 - Noting stage.

The Committee noted the purpose of the SR, subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure under the powers in the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011, is to prohibit the third-party sale and supply of puppies, and sale of kittens, by any person who has not bred the animal themselves; that any sale or supply of such animals takes place at the premises where they were bred; and will introduce conditions relating to sales and advertising.

The Committee noted that Officials are scheduled to brief the Committee on the draft 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.

The Committee agreed that due to time constraints agenda items 14 and 15 were to be moved to the meeting on 20 October.

16. Any Other Business

None

17. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 20 October at 10:00am in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned 1:52pm

Signature:

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated