Northern Ireland Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

4 June 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
	Daniel McCrossan MLA
	Michelle McIlveen MLA
	Gareth Wilson MLA
Via Zoom:	Áine Murphy MLA
In Attendance:	Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk
	Glenda Doherty, Senior Assistant 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 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 with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill.

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

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to the Written Ministerial Statement from the Minister on the Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report 1 April 2024 – 31 March 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to the Oral Ministerial Statement made in the Chamber on 1 June relating to the North South Ministerial Council Aquaculture and Marine Sector meeting held on Friday 15 May.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

John Blair MLA joined the meeting at 10:14am

The Chairperson referred to the Oral Ministerial Statement the Minister made in the Chamber on 1 June relating to the North South Ministerial Council Agriculture Sectoral meeting held on Friday 15 May.

The Committee discussed concerns regarding the pausing, by the Department of Agriculture Fisheries and the Marine (DAFM), of the export of poultry litter from

Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland. Members highlighted that there is a known deficit of 'P' in the Republic of Ireland and a surplus in Northern Ireland and that the decision would have implications for the Nutrients Action Plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister to alert him to the concerns raised and enquire what actions the Department are undertaking to address the issue with DAFM.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange an informal meeting to discuss the issue with Shared Environmental Services (SES), and representatives from the Poultry and Egg producing sector.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Department regarding the launch on 1 June of the 7 week Consultation on the Designation of Lagan Meadows as a Quiet Area.

The Committee noted Lagan Meadows has been proposed for designation as a Quiet Area, to be protected from an increase in noise in accordance with Regulation 40 of the Environmental Noise Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 18 May, from the Northern Ireland representative of the British Hydropower Association regarding a court action taken by the Department, alleging a breaching of Sections 58 and 59 of the 1966 Fisheries Act.

The Committee noted that due to the ongoing legal case caution would need to be exercised in any discussion.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to an invitation to attend the Law Society of Northern Ireland Climate Justice Conference, on Thursday 18 June, at the Ulster Museum from 12pm to 4pm.

The Chair advised that he would be available to attend to represent the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chair would attend, with the Clerk, to represent the Committee and Members would reply individually to the invitation.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 27 May, from an individual seeking an update regarding asbestos contamination at the former Ulster Weavers site on Maldon / Meridi Street.

The Committee noted as although it does not respond to individual queries it recognised it raised potentially wider concerns about environmental health and protection of public safety.

The Committee noted it had previously agreed to write to both the Minister and Belfast City Council on the issue and recapped the responses received and the consideration it has taken on the matter.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the responses from the Minister and Belfast City Council to the individual.

The Chairperson referred to the response from the Department, dated 6 May, regarding the queries on The Sheep Carcase Classification and Price Reporting Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

The Committee noted it agreed to forward the correspondence to NIMEA for comment and on 21 May it considered NIMEA's response.

Agreed: The Committee agreed forward NIMEA's response to the Department.

The Committee noted that at its meeting on 21 May it agreed to hold an informal discussion, on Monday 8 June at 10.00am, with the Department and NIMEA to discuss the outstanding issues and concerns that have been raised and that the UFU have also expressed an interest in attending.

Agreed: The Committee was content to invite the UFU to the informal meeting.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 28 May 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 27 May, from the Minister regarding the impact of rising costs of maritime fuel in the context of the extension of the UK Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) to the domestic maritime sector, and the advent of the UK Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM).

The Committee noted the Minister states he supports the extension of the UK ETS but it must be implemented fairly, and in recognition of Northern Ireland's specific circumstances and that negotiations are ongoing between the UK and EU to explore a potential ETS link to create the conditions to facilitate mutual exemptions from both parties CBAMs.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department for the Economy, dated 1 June, in response to its request for clarification on what cross departmental frameworks or schemes are currently in place, or are being considered, to support 'Green Growth'.

The Committee noted the Interdepartmental Biomethane Group, chaired by the Centre for Advanced Sustainable Energy, consisting of the Department for the Economy (DfE), DAERA and the Utility Regulator meets monthly to develop a cross departmental biomethane policy. It has also reached out to stakeholders to discuss topics including the gas industry, biomethane production, planning & regulation, nutrient management and financing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 27 May, in response to its query on how the Department manages the challenges arising from

potentially competing targets of the Peatland Strategy Delivery Plan (April 2026-December 2027) and how it contributes to the 30by30 nature recovery targets.

The Committee noted that peatland restoration and afforestation are not in conflict as Restoration focuses on protecting carbon-rich peat soils, while afforestation schemes avoid deep peat areas.

The Committee also noted in relation to the 30by30 nature recovery, the Tree Planting Action Plan will outline actions to enable accelerating woodland creation in Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted that last June it visited the An Creagan peatland restoration project outside Omagh which involved the deforestation of neighbouring pine forest to facilitate peatland regeneration.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to enquire if the deforestation to enable restoration of peatland areas is taken into account when considering the Department's afforestation targets.

Daniel McCrossan MLA Joined the meeting at 10:27am

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:29am

The Committee agreed to move to agenda item 14 and noted it was a late addition to the agenda as the Committee Team only received notification late o the previous afternoon.

14. The Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill

The Committee considered correspondence from the Minister, dated 3 June, notifying that The First Minister and deputy First Minister, acting jointly under paragraph 2.14 of the Ministerial Code, have approved the introduction of the Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill to the Assembly.

The Committee also considered a pre introduction copy of the draft Bill and the Explanatory and Financial Memorandum

The Committee noted it will receive a briefing from Officials at the meeting next meeting.

Agreed: The Committee were content to note the draft Bill.

6. Departmental Oral Evidence Session - Departmental Oral Evidence Session SL1 - The Farming with Nature Scheme (Amendment) Regulations 2026

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted that the Department submitted the SL1 and draft SR to the Committee on 24 April to advise of its intention to make a new regulation under the negative resolution procedure to provide the Department with the legal powers to update payment rates, expand eligibility, and introduce additional actions to Year 2 of the Farming with Nature Transition Scheme.

The Committee also noted that on 7 May it agreed to receive this oral briefing from DAERA officials and to issue a call for views using the Citizen Space platform, which received no responses.
The following Agriculture Policy Division Officials briefed the Committee:

- Mr Richard Johnston, Director
- Mr Manus McHenry, Deputy Director; and
- Mr John Crawford, Head of Legislation Branch

The Committee heard details of Year 2 of the Scheme including the new additions and actions to be introduced.

A question and answer session followed:

The Committee heard that no farmers or landowners will be disadvantaged or excluded under the revised criteria and the scope of the scheme will be much wider this year.

The Committee heard future strands of the Farming with Nature Package will provide support to protect and manage environmentally important habitats including those within areas with natural constraints. Other topics of discussion included:

- The Department's rationale for the level of funding allocated;
- Considerations given to the lack of inclusion of protective fencing;
- Timelines for consideration of options to provide further incentives for farmers;
- The establishment of nature corridors and benefits of buffer strips; and
- The measurement of financial costs compared to biodiversity benefits.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content to support the SR as drafted, subject to the ESR report.

Tom Buchanan MLA joined the meeting at 10:51am

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 10:52am

The RalSe Research Officer joined the meeting at 10:53am

Áine Murphy MLA joined the meeting by zoom at 11:00am

7. Areas of Natural Constraint (Payments Bill) - Briefing from RalSe - Review of Costs

The Committee noted that at last week's meeting it commenced the oral evidence with a briefing from RalSe on the policy aspects of the Bill and this briefing from the RalSe Public Finance Scrutiny Unit will focus on the potential cost implications.
The following RalSe Official briefed the Committee:

- Nathan Mulholland – Research Officer

The Committee was briefed on the RalSe paper covering the potential "public purse" financial implications arising from the Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill, as introduced, including potential issues for Committee consideration.

The Committee heard that given the challenging budgetary context for AERA the ANC payments could place pressures on the Department budget and may require trade-offs with other schemes if additional funding does not come available from in-year monitoring bids.

The Chair thanked the RalSe Research Officer for his attendance.

The RalSe researcher left the meeting at 11:09am

The Committee noted that the Delegated Powers Memorandum is not yet available but will be provided for the Committee in due course.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to all statutory Committees seeking their views on the Bill.

8. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Motion for extension to Committee Stage

The Committee noted the Committee stage of the Bill commenced on 27 May and the last day of Committee Stage is currently 2 September 2026, by which time the Committee should lay its report unless the Committee seeks an extension.

The Committee considered an extension of the Committee Stage to 5 February 2027 and some concerns were raised regarding the proposed date.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the motion to extend the Committee Stage at the next meeting alongside a draft timetable covering all the Bills.

9. Withdrawal of The Mandatory Use of Closed Circuit Television in Slaughterhouses Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee noted that following its scrutiny of the SR on 19 March it agreed that it was content for it to proceed as drafted in the Assembly debate which was scheduled for 1 June.

The Committee then considered correspondence, dated 29 May, from the Department requesting that the SR be withdrawn in light of drafting errors that were highlighted by the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

The Committee also noted that a corrected, SR and Explanatory Memorandum with SL5 was submitted to the Assembly Business Office on 3 June and would be considered by the Committee in due course.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

10. Correspondence

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

- An invitation from the Department to attend an event marking the completion of the First Reporting Cycles Under The Climate Change (Reporting Bodies) Regulations (NI) 2024 on Thursday, 11 June 2026, from 8.30am to 11.00am
- A memo dated 29 May from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn information – March Restated (R13) position.
- A memo dated 29 May from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding National Population Projections for Northern Ireland.
- A memo dated 27 May from the Clerk to the Committee for Communities regarding Retention and Disposal Schedules.
- The 67th ESR Report dated 29 May, which contained no SRs of relevance to the Committee.
- The Youth Assembly monthly update for May 2026.
- A copy of the Construction Employers Federation (CEF) Manifesto for the 2027 NI Assembly Election.
- The ISNI Activity Report dated 1 June.
- Correspondence the Committee has been copied into, dated 29 May, from an individual to NIEA, regarding a formal complaint about the Regen Waste facility.

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

A Member queried the £50 million from DAERA allocated to the Shaping Sustainable Places Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a written briefing from the Department detailing how the funds will be used to support rural communities.

13. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 11 June at 10:00am in Room 21 Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned 11:29am

Signature: ……..

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated …….