



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

23 October 2025

Meeting location: Titanic Hotel, 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
Áine Murphy MLA

Apologies: William Irwin MLA

In Attendance: James Gilsenan, Acting 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

There were no apologies.

2. Declaration of Interests

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

Declan McAleer MLA declared that he is an executor and owner of a small farm in Co Tyrone.

Tom Buchanan MLA declared an interest as a partner in a farm business.

The Chairperson declared an interest as a former member of the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service.

John Blair MLA joined the meeting at 10:17am

Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting at 10:17am

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chair referred to the publication of the Independent Review of Environmental Governance in Northern Ireland Final Report that makes a number of recommendations including: DAERA to publish a 'map' of environmental governance; all public authorities in Northern Ireland to have a 'duty to co-operate' with the environmental regulator; and the regulator to make greater use of existing civil sanctions and to adopt new civil sanctions for other environmental areas to support compliance and enforcement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to return to consider the report further at the next meeting on 6 November.

The Chair referred to the Dilapidation Bill and sought the Committee's agreement to continue accepting written evidence from stakeholders until the Christmas recess and then for the Committee to review the position.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to continue to accept written evidence until the Christmas 2025 recess.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 16 October 2025.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department dated 16 October regarding the sighting of an Asian Hornet in Northern Ireland on 10 October.

The Committee noted the response provided information regarding the Departments response to the situation and measures being taken including a monitoring programme involving live-capture traps and visual survey of the area as well as raising awareness to members of the public. The Committee also noted that a nest had been located in Dundonald.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request:

Further details regarding the Department's plan of action in response to the detection of Asian Hornets together with any associated cost analysis; if the Department has established how Asian Hornets arrived into the jurisdiction and, if not, what investigations are currently underway to determine this; and the measures being implemented, or planned, to enhance public awareness and engagement in relation to the issue, in addition to the Defra 'Asian Hornet Watch' app.

The Committee considered correspondence from The Native Irish Honey Bee Society (NIHBS), dated 17 October regarding The International Union for the Conservation of Nature, (IUCN) updating of the status of Ireland's only native honey

bee - the wild western Honey bee *Apis Mellifera*, also known as the Black Bee - to *Endangered* within the European Union.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 16 October, regarding opportunities from the Shared Island Funding to grow and further develop the aquaculture sector In Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted it provided details of the “All Island Marine Bio-based Refineries for Circular Blue-Bioeconomy” (AIMBIO) collaborative project of which Rathlin Island is one of three sites, converting untapped resources from aquaculture into high-value ingredients for a wide variety of industries.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the response.

The Committee considered the response from the Department dated 16 October regarding The Farm Sustainability Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

The Committee noted further details regarding cross-compliance penalties issued within the last 5 years.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to discuss the matter further when considering the SR 2025/165 The Farm Sustainability Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 at Agenda item 7.

The Committee considered the response from the Department dated 16 October regarding its query in relation to its scrutiny of the Waste and Resources Common Framework.

The Committee noted that reviews of the Framework may involve targeted stakeholders for transparency but a full public consultation is considered unlikely and noted the increase in tonnage of exported waste that goes for incineration abroad has increased from 188,194 tonnes in 2021 to 288,766 tonnes in 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a clerk's memo outlining the scrutiny undertaken regarding Clause 16 of the Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill which is specific to the work of the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the Clerk to the Committee for Finance advising it is content with the content and ambition of Clause 16 of the Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill.

The Departmental Official joined the meeting at 10:26am

6. Departmental Oral Briefing - Wildfires in NI Strategic Framework 2025-2030

The following Official briefed the Committee:

- Mark Hammond, Head of Natural Environment Operations.

The Committee heard how the Framework provides a road map over the next five years to co-ordinate the future wildfire efforts of all stakeholders, focused around objectives of prevention, preparedness, response, recovery and enforcement.

The Committee heard that a co designed Action Plan is in development and will be drafted by March 2026.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard that collective action is required to address the wildfire challenges and the multi-agency approach now adopted in Northern Ireland is unique in the UK and Europe.

The Committee also heard that public awareness, education and assistance to bring about successful prosecutions of those who are responsible for wildfires due to arson is required.

Members highlighted the importance of engagement with local communities, farmers and landowners who can offer valuable insights into local conditions and assist the wildfire response efforts.

The Chair thanked Mr Hammond for his attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an oral briefing and the opportunity to comment on the Action Plan prior to its finalisation.

The Departmental Official left the meeting at 11:01am

7. SR 2025/165 The Farm Sustainability Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee noted it had an oral briefing on 2 October and heard that the Department intended to make this SR under negative resolution to replace the current Cross-Compliance arrangements with the new Farm Sustainability Standards and associated penalty regime from 1 January 2026.

The Committee noted there have been two amendments made due to transcribing errors since the SL1 was submitted to the Committee but these that have not resulted in any changes to policy content.

The Committee noted that a response to its query why a full Human Rights Assessment was deemed to not be required, and what criteria would have needed to be met for one to be completed is still awaited.

The Committee noted the end of the Statutory Period has been calculated as 25 November and therefore had time for further consideration if required.

Members raised concerns including the increased powers for an authorised person, and the definition of qualifying crops eligible for farm sustainability payments.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek an oral briefing on 6 November to assist its consideration of the SR.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek further clarification from the Department regarding details of the test it applies to determine when a Statutory Rule requires an Equality Impact Assessment.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department regarding further clarification regarding increased powers for authorised persons; and the rationale for determining the definition of crops that qualify to be eligible for Farm Sustainability Payments.

8. Departmental Written Briefing - Northern Ireland Peatland Strategy to 2040

The Committee noted the Strategy sets the framework for peatland conservation, management and restoration and is designed to respond to the twin challenges of biodiversity loss and climate change via 5 Strategic Environmental Outcomes (SEO): Peatland Conservation, Restoration & Management; Policy Alignment; Capacity Building and Research; Knowledge Sharing, Communication and Access; and Governance, Implementation and Funding.

The Committee noted a Delivery Plan will soon be published with the establishment of a Project Management Board to oversee implementation of the Strategy and that DAERA will be consulting on restricting retail sales of peat and peat products in early 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the Strategy.

9. Departmental Written Briefing - Update on Ammonia Strategy and Operational Protocol

The Committee noted a letter had been issued in lieu of the expected written briefing, however there was no difference in content.

The Committee noted that the Ammonia Strategy will be finalised when the Nutrients Action Programme (NAP) 2026 – 2029 has been agreed as it contains two proposed mandatory measures that form part of the Strategy: 100% use of Low Emission Slurry Spreading Equipment (LSSE) by 2030; and a prohibition on the use of granular urea fertilisers unless they contain urease inhibitors from January 2026. These measures will now to be considered by the NAP Stakeholder Task and Finish Group, and subject to a further eight-week consultation.

The Committee noted in relation to the Operational Protocol, responses to the public consultation on the SEA Environmental Report will inform the SEA Statement, the Operational Protocol, and the Ammonia Strategy.

The Committee also noted that issues raised regarding double counting of emissions and replacement buildings, are being considered by Officials who are also working on the development of a pilot programme of site-specific actions to reduce ammonia emissions around designated sites.

10. Correspondence

The Committee considered correspondence from Enva Ltd inviting the Committee to a briefing and a tour of its new fridge recycling facility in Toomebridge,

The Committee noted it considered an invitation from Enva at its meeting of 11 September and has been added to the Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Clerk to the Committee for Infrastructure dated 21 October seeking its views on the Water, Sustainable Drainage and Flood Management Bill.

A member requested that it would be useful for the Committee to have sight of any RalSe research papers on climate change affecting rising sea levels and flooding.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the matter further at the next meeting to agree a response.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted 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 6 November at Room 21, Parliament Buildings at 10.00am

The meeting was adjourned at 11:20am

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated