



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

02 July 2026

Meeting location: Room 21 Parliament Buildings

Present: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
Aoife Finnegan 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, Chaired by the Deputy Chairperson at 9:33am

1. Apologies

Michelle McIlveen MLA

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 and that he is an executor and owner of a small farm in Co Tyrone.

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

The Committee agreed to move to Agenda item 6 first to accommodate the Minister's attendance at an Executive budget meeting.

The Minister and the Permanent Secretary Katrina Godfrey joined the meeting at 9:33am.

Aoife Finnigan MLA joined the meeting at 9:53am

Robbie Bulter MLA joined the meeting and assumed duties of Chairperson at 9:53 am

6. Ministerial Evidence Session - Update on Current DAERA Issues and Programmes

This item was recorded by Hansard

The Minister thanked the Committee for the opportunity to brief the Committee and agreeing to move the briefing forward to accommodate his attendance at an Executive budget meeting.

The Committee were given an overview of the current and future work undertaken by the Department to deliver on its key pledges and priorities as set out in the Department's Corporate Plan with actions relating to:

- Climate change and finalisation of the Climate Action Plan;
- Delivering actions in Environmental Improvement Plan;
- Slurry Management and proposals for the Revised Nutrients Action Plan;
- Waste water management, the wider issue of water quality; the Lough Neagh Action Plan, and efforts to make a special designation for Belfast Lough;
- Land use, including The Tree Planting Action Plan and Peatland restoration;
- Animal health, bio security, and animal welfare;
- Agri food and farming and the continued roll out of schemes within the Sustainable Agriculture Programme;
- Legislating for stronger fines and penalties via the Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill; and
- Tackling Rural poverty.

The Committee heard that budget challenges remain due to the ongoing financial constraints and lack of agreement, as yet, on the multi-year budget.

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

- Issue of slurry management and export of Phosphorous surplus to the Republic of Ireland;
- Progress of the NAP consultation;
- The impact both financial and mentally on farmers due to Bovine TB and ongoing efforts at eradication;
- Tackling animal cruelty;
- Proposed usage of the £49 million Shared Ireland Fund;
- Waste Water pollution and engagement with the Infrastructure Minister regarding proposals to withdraw from SORPI;
- Actions being taken to address the backlog in NIEA planning applications and issues with NIEA staff vacancies;
- Progress of the Lough Neagh Action Plan; and
- Budget challenges.

The Chair thanked the Minister and the Permanent Secretary Katrina Godfrey for their attendance.

The Minister and the Permanent Secretary left the meeting at 10:31am

The Committee returned to Agenda Item 3

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to a series of correspondence from the Countryside Alliance Ireland (CAI) regarding the Committee's Call for Evidence on the Hunting with Dogs Bill.

The Committee noted it considered the matter last week and were content with the Clerk's response to the first correspondence, dated 19 June, from the CAI.

The Committee also noted that the Clerk received a further email and a telephone call from the Countryside Alliance and Committee had agreed that the Clerk would seek advice from the Clerk Assistants before considering any further response.

The Committee then considered its draft response that clarified a number of matters raised by the CAI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek its own legal advice on the matters raised in the correspondence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue the drafted response to CAI on behalf of the Committee.

The Chairperson referred to the delegated powers in the Areas of Natural Constraint (Payments) Bill and the Hunting with Dogs Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Areas of Natural Constraint (Payments) Bill and the Hunting with Dogs Bill to the Examiner of Statutory Rules for her advice on delegated powers.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Department, dated 1 July, regarding an eight-week public consultation to be launched on 3 July on two pieces of marine policy guidance that support the implementation of the Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland:

- Guidance on the Making of Byelaws under Part 3 of the Marine Act (NI) 2013; and
- Draft Guidance on the Use of Fixed Monetary Penalties in Marine Protected Areas

The Chair referred to several procedural matters that required a decision before the Committee enters summer recess.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to delegate authority to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, during recess, to submit views on the releasing or withholding of information in any non-routine or contentious Freedom of Information requests received by the Committee during the recess period.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to deal with any urgent matters during recess by correspondence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the Forward Work Programme after the summer recess.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to sign off the minutes for the meeting at the next formal meeting of the Committee.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 25 June 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 26 June, regarding the Peatland Strategy Delivery Plan (April 2026-December 2027).

The Committee noted the response provided details on how the Department quantifies deforestation associated with peatland restoration, when existing forestry is removed to restore bogland, and how it is accounted for within Northern Ireland's afforestation and woodland-creation targets.

The Committee noted the area of woodlands removed for peatland restoration needs to be replaced as a component part of extending our forest cover to 12% by 2050 from the current level of 8.6%.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 26 June, providing information on the legislation and operational requirements that set out and

support the councils' role in achieving air quality objectives (queried at the briefing on the SL Draft Air Quality (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 on 28 May).

The Committee noted that there is a shared responsibility for air quality - the Department oversees ambient air quality and regulatory compliance, and councils are responsible for local assessment and review and report annually and designate an Air Quality Management Area (AQMA); and produce a Department approved action plan where standards are not met;

The Committee also noted the Department provides grant funding to support councils' work while councils fund part of the costs and manage day-to-day monitoring operations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 26 June, regarding the Veterinary Inspectors' Pay and Grading Dispute following a briefing by NIPSA on 11 June.

The Committee noted the response states the Department regrets that the action is taking place and is committed to following NICS HR policies and procedures on the grading of posts.

The Committee also noted the response provided a timeline from the commencement of the job evaluation and grading exercise in October 2023 through to 20 April 2026 when NIPSA notified the department of the outcome of its ballot, and the nature and timeline of the industrial action commencing on 1 May 2026.

The Committee also noted it provided information to the nature and frequency of engagement with NIPSA and to the NICS job evaluation and grading process, which the Department believes to have been compliant with NICS HR policies.

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the reply to the NIPSA Officials.

The Committee noted at the meeting on 25 June it considered a response from the Department, dated 19 June, regarding the queries it raised following its informal meeting on 26 May with the Bonds Glen Environmental Group.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the Department's response with the Bonds Glen Group.

The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 30 June, on queries at the briefing on 18 June from Officials on The Agriculture (Student Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026. The Committee noted the response provided further detail on:

- CAFRE's optimum student capacity;
- The role of the DAERA Children's Champion; and
- Access to and the promotion of CAFRE Care Experienced Bursary and other financial support for care experienced students undertaking higher education courses at CAFRE.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered notification from the Department, dated 30 June, that the consultation response summary for the Draft Waste Management Strategy will be provided for the committee by the end of the summer and that the Department will provide a briefing following recess.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 29 June, regarding the launch on 3 July of the 12-week public consultation on Potential Wildlife Intervention Options as part of the Bovine Tuberculosis in Northern Ireland: Blueprint for Eradication.

The Committee noted the consultation will invite views on a range of potential wildlife intervention options and associated delivery mechanisms and the Department will provide an update on the outcome of the consultation and next steps in due course.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:47am

The Committee moved to Agenda Item 7 as Agenda Item 6 had been taken earlier as agreed.

7. Departmental Oral Evidence Session - Policy Intention – Generational Renewal Response and Farming for the Generations Scheme

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Paul McHenry - Director, CAFRE;
- George Moffitt - Acting Director, Agricultural Policy Division; and
- Mark Scott - Head of College Support Services, CAFRE

The Committee were given an update on the development of the Generational Renewal Policy Response and the Farming for the Generations Scheme, anticipated to launch in November 2026, and noted the Scheme has three Pathways:

- Succession Pathway (Identified Successor);
- Young Farmers' Pathway for Successor Aged 18-40; and
- Land Mobility Pathway (No Identified Successor).

The Committee heard it will support farming business continuity, generational renewal and long-term sustainability ensuring succession planning is adopted as a normal part of farm business planning; provide successors with the opportunity to develop skills, knowledge, and experience; and give the opportunity for Farm Business with younger farmers to receive financial support.

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

- The Departments co-design process including engagement with other jurisdictions to achieve best practice;
- The impact of the inheritance tax issue in raising awareness of the need for succession planning;
- Projected costs of the scheme; and

- Concerns that lack of entitlements and impact of the closure of the Regional Reserve might undermine the scheme for new entrants.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11:13am

The meeting was suspended at 11:13am

The meeting resumed at 11:32am

Aine Murphy MLA joined the meeting via Zoom at 11:32am

8. Departmental Oral Evidence Session - Overview of Public Consultation Responses to Rural NI: Our New Approach (2026 - 2041)

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Dr Jason Foy - Director of Rural Affairs;
- Claire McAllister - Deputy Director of Rural Affairs; and
- Maria Bradley - Head of Strategic Rural Policy Branch

The Committee were given an update and a high level summary of responses to the 12-week public consultation, which closed on 1 June 2026.

The Committee heard responses generally showed higher and more consistent levels of support in relation to governance arrangements, partnership working, funding mechanisms and the use of evidence-based approaches.

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

- The adequacy of Departmental resources to ensure Programme delivery;
- The Department's proposals for a Rural Champion to be a senior official within the Department, with the role to be fully defined going forward;
- Concerns that funding will not be delivered to front line communities;
- Concerns that the policy will not be delivered before the end of the current mandate; and
- Concerns that rural areas will be within scope of the Shaping Sustainable Places Programme.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 12:00pm

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 12:01pm

9. Departmental Oral Evidence Session – Launch of the Consultation of the Nutrients Action Programme 2027-2030

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Dr Alistair Carson - Chief Scientific Adviser;
- Fiona Dickson – Assistant Director, Natural Environment Policy Division;
- Brian Ervine - Head of Environmental Farming Branch; and
- Julie Thompson - Deputy Secretary & Head of Environment, Marine and Fisheries Group

The Committee were given an update regarding the launch on 29 June of the 10-week consultation on the Nutrients Action Programme 2027-2030.

The Committee heard that the revised proposals aim to improve water quality by reducing nutrient pollution, while providing a practical and deliverable framework for farmers and the wider agri-food sector, and supporting a sustainable agri-food industry.

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

- Stakeholders' engagement in the process and lessons learnt from criticism of the previous consultation;
- Ongoing monitoring, evaluation, and review through a NAP Steering Group to enable targeted intervention if required;
- Inter and cross-departmental co-operation to ensure a joined up approach;
- Proposals to revise the current derogation arrangements through a Nutrient Stewardship Programme;
- Nutrient efficiency;
- Potential impact on efforts to deal with the Phosphorous surplus; and
- Funding support.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 12:44pm

10. Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill

The Committee noted that following the Second stage debate on 30 June the Committee Stage commenced on 1 July and is due to end on 7 October 2026, by which time the Committee should lay its report unless the Committee seeks and is granted an extension.

The Committee considered a Motion to Extend the Committee stage to 5 February 2027

Agreed: The Committee agreed to put forward a Motion to Extend the Committee stage to 5 February 2027.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, following the Committee's request for information to clearly show the interactions between the Bill and other relevant legislation and what are new powers, modified powers etc.

The Committee noted the Department has provided:

- An outline of the structure of the Bill;
- Detail of how the Bill interacts with other fisheries and water environmental legislation;
- A summary of the provisions of the Bill, noting new powers, modifications and powers derived from other existing legislation;
- Detail of the offences and revised penalties, and
- Detail of how the Fisheries Act (NI)1966 will be amended by the new Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note and return to use the information after recess as the Committee Stage progresses.

The Committee noted the Bills Delegated Powers Memorandum (DPM)

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the DPM to the Examiner of Statutory Rules for her advice on delegated powers in the Bill.

The Committee considered the Draft stakeholder list and noted it can invite other stakeholders if needed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was content with the list as drafted.

The Committee considered the Call for Views Citizen Space questions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was content with the questions as drafted.

The Committee considered the Bill Timetable

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered the Draft press adverts for the Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was content with the Press adverts as drafted.

11. SR 2026/116 The Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee noted it considered the SL1 in February 2025, when it noted the purpose of the SR is to amend The Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995 to align the designation of marine Special Protection Areas (SPAs) and marine Special Areas of Conservation (SACs) to the same procedure as designating Marine Conservation Zones (MCZs) in the Marine Act (Northern Ireland) 2013, and DAERA's responsibility for the management and monitoring of European marine sites in the NI inshore region.

The Committee noted that on 20 February 2025, following an oral briefing from Officials, it agreed the Department could progress with the drafting and making of the SR.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 24 June, explaining the delay in laying the regulations, which was due to the lengthy process of drafting and seeking approval from Defra officials followed by seeking official consent from the Defra Secretary of State and from the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted that despite this delay Officials stated there has been no policy change since the briefing was provided to the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it has no objection to the Rule subject to the ESR report.

12. SR 2026/124 - The Dangerous Dogs (Compensation and Exemption Schemes) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee noted the purpose of the SR under negative resolution procedure is to remove the legal requirement to have third-party liability insurance in place for prohibited breeds and also to introduce a new exemption condition which requires that children under the age of 12 not be left in close proximity to a prohibited breed in a home or private setting without adult supervision.

The Committee noted it will come into operation on a phased basis, with the removal of the insurance requirement taking effect from 1 July. The introduction of the new exemption condition will take effect from 1 November as there is a need to get councils on board and get owners prepared.

The Committee noted as the third-party public liability insurance benefit ends on 30 June, the Minister requested Committee agreement to an expedited Committee scrutiny process.

The Committee noted its Call for Views closed on 27 June and received zero responses and that at the meeting on 25 June it agreed that it was content for the Department to make the SR.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it has no objection to the Rule subject to the ESR report.

13. Departmental written briefing- Tree Planting Action Plan

The Committee noted the Forest Service will have responsibility for implementation of the Plan which identifies actions to encourage increased forest cover to meet Climate Action Plan commitments.

The Committee noted current annual planting targets of 600 ha. need to be increased to 2100 ha. by 2030 and to increase afforestation levels from the current 8.6% to 12% of land area by 2050.

The Committee noted the Action Plan seeks to address issues that fall within four high-level strategic categories:

1. Governance and implementation;

2. Communication and knowledge transfer;
3. Education and capacity building;
4. Research and evidence.

Within these four categories ten strategic actions have been agreed along with 31 implementing actions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask how the loss of woodland is measured and quantified as a result of storm damage.

14. Departmental written briefing - Forest Service Business Plan 2026/27

The Committee noted the Plan will deliver a programme of forestry and plant health activities, which align with Departmental priorities in support of the Programme for Government, and contribute to the DAERA Corporate Plan 2025-2027, in particular the delivery on the Climate Action Plan.

It proposes 13 Forest Service Agency level targets, six of which are set as Ministerial priorities and designated as KPTs.

- 1 Create at least 600 hectares of new woodland;
- 2 Implement updated forestry grant schemes to support an afforestation programme in line with Climate Action Plan commitments;
- 3 Develop and publish a Tree Planting Action Plan;
- 4 Manage DAERA forests in compliance with the UK Forestry Standard;
- 5 Remove self-seeding conifer trees from 400 hectares of open habitat peatland identified for restoration; and
6. Bring to market selected Forest Service sites for the development of renewable energy generation projects by 31 December 2026.

The Committee noted that the Plan also aims to continue to provide environmental, economic, social and health and well-being benefits; protect high plant health status by reducing risks of the introduction and spread of plant pests and diseases; and continue its programme to improve employee engagement, capability, and capacity.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

15. Correspondence

Agreed: The Committee considered and agreed to action the following items of correspondence as detailed in the correspondence memo.

Correspondence dated 24 June, from the Department regarding the Approval of Round 4 Roads Department for Infrastructure Noise Action Plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence, dated 24 June, that the Clerk has been copied into from the DAERA Permanent Secretary to the Clerk of the Democratic Scrutiny Committee with notification of recent updates regarding the application of the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) in Northern Ireland and that the Secretary of State for EFRA has designated DAERA as a Competent Authority for its enforcement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence dated 25 June, from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy seeing the views of all Assembly Statutory Committees regarding the Regional Balance Bill by 22 September.

The Committee discussed that the Committee for the Economy consider whether the Regional Balance Framework should include a clear rural dimension, rather than treating regions as uniform areas, and to consider whether the Bill and Framework will adequately reflect rural-specific economic and social challenges.

Members noted that assessing deprivation in rural areas is challenging, as it is often geographically dispersed, and poorly captured by conventional statistical measures and as a result, pockets of rural deprivation can be overlooked.

Members also highlighted that rural residents may face distinct challenges, such as limited access to services such as public transport, healthcare, education, and digital connections.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue a response to the Economy Committee requesting they take its comments into account during the Committee Stage.

A memo from the Clerk of the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) regarding its Review of the Primacy of NIAO Reports: A Strategic Review of the Planning Appeals

Commission (21 May 2026); and Flood Risk Management in Northern Ireland (16 June 2026).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A copy of the OEP Paper titled Progress in improving the natural environment in Northern Ireland 2024/2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A copy of the Climate Change Committee Annual Progress in reducing emissions 2026 report to Parliament.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence from the Department, dated 30 June, regarding its intention to launch a targeted 8-week stakeholder consultation on The Hemp (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 on 6 July.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A copy of the Strategic Investment Board - Investing Activity Report dated 28 June.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

16. Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted there was no draft Forward Work Programme as it was the last meeting before recess and that it would return to it after recess.

17. Any Other Business

None

18. Date and Time of Next Meeting

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

The meeting was adjourned 1pm

Signature:

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated