



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

12 June 2025

Castle Archdale, Fermanagh

Present: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
Aoife Finnegan MLA
William Irwin MLA
Patsy McGlone MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA

Apologies: Áine Murphy MLA

In Attendance: Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk
Mr Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk
Mr Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor
Ms Sarah Preece, Clerical Officer

The Meeting Opened in Public Session at 10:47am

1. Apologies

None

2. Declaration of Interests

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

None were declared.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chair referred to correspondence from the Minister, dated 6 June, regarding the forthcoming introduction of the Dilapidation Bill.

The Committee noted that the purpose of the Bill is to confer functions on district councils to tackle the issue of dilapidated/dangerous buildings and neglected sites, including a series of notices, offences, penalties and appeals.

The Committee noted that it had considered and noted the synopsis of responses to the consultation at its meeting on 12 September 2024 and that it will have an introductory briefing on the Bill from Officials at the meeting of 19 June.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chair referred to correspondence from the Department, dated 3 June, seeking the Committees views on tabling a Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) concerning a Government-backed Private Member's Bill - Animal Welfare (Import Of Cats, Dogs And Ferrets).

The Committee noted the Bill provides for powers to make secondary legislation to prohibit the importation cats, dogs and ferrets into Northern Ireland on animal welfare grounds, by including the legislative provision in a Private Members' Bill which is currently making its way through the UK Parliament.

The Committee noted the Department has requested that the Committee expedite their reporting period to report on the LCM by 20th June.

The Committee considered the Department rationale for the request in order to move the Motion on the last sitting day of the Assembly on 1 July and adhere to Standing Orders.

The Committee noted is a Government backed PMB which means there is no mechanism to amend this piece of draft legislation once it leaves the House of Commons and moves to the House of Lords thereby leaving little time to fulfil the scrutiny process in the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Committee noted that the Department advised that it is not in a position to provide a briefing to the Committee as expected at the meeting of 19 June.

Members of the Committee expressed concern that, although supportive of the Bill in principle on animal welfare grounds, it would not be in a position to report on the LCM without the Department providing a briefing to allow exploration of any potential issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to key stakeholders seeking their comments on the Bill as part of its scrutiny and due diligence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an urgent oral briefing from Officials, otherwise it would not be in a position to consider expediting its report on the LCM.

The Chair referred to correspondence from the Minister regarding the statement he made to the Assembly on Monday regarding the Public consultation on the draft Remediation Strategy for the Mobuoy site.

The Committee noted the Chair and the Deputy Chair met with the Minister briefly on 9 June to discuss the consultation and the Minister highlighted the very technical nature of remediation proposals and noted that the costs could be significant.

The Committee noted that it will be briefed on the matter in due course.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chair referred to the Clerk's Memo summarising the informal meeting on 3 June between the Chair, Deputy Chair and Minister Muir on the NAP Consultation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the memo.

The Chair referred to correspondence from the Office of Environmental Protection (OEP), dated 9 June, regarding the Oxford Research Project highlighted by a Member at the meeting on 29 May.

The Committee noted the OEP believes the small-scale study has its merits but that it does not provide evidence specifically to inform the relative importance of agricultural and wastewater sources of nutrient pollution.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Chair referred to the draft press release for the Committee's visit to Tyrone and Fermanagh on 11th / 12th June.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to the publication of the press release

4. Minutes

The Minutes of the Concurrent meeting with the Committee for Infrastructure on 3 June were agreed and signed by the Chair to be published.

Agreed: The Minutes were agreed.

The Minutes of the meeting on 5 June were agreed and signed by the Chair to be published.

Agreed: The Minutes were agreed.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered correspondence from the Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-Operative, dated 4 June, regarding Collection of Eel Sampling Data.

The correspondence highlighted that given the importance of data collection in helping to understand the issues faced by the industry, the Co-Operative was concerned at DAERA's notification that this seasons planned sampling schedule is to be reduced.

Agreed. The Committee agreed to note the correspondence

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 6 June, regarding Public Estate Value to Society to the range of queries raised by Committee during a briefing from the Assembly's Research and Information Service (RaISe) at its meeting on 1 May.

The Committee noted the response includes some detail on DAERA's commitment to adopt a natural capital approach in line with the Environmental Improvement Plan.

The Committee also noted that although policy development has not progressed to date in relation to inter-Departmental adoption of a natural capital approach, DAERA will play a significant role in taking forward any such policy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered an embargoed update from the Department on the remediation of the Mobuoy site, in relation to the public consultation due for launch on 13 June 2025.

The Committee noted the Mobuoy site presents potential risks to the public drinking water supply and the environment and that the Department has put in place a Mobuoy Remediation Project team to manage and mitigate the risks presented and to take forward plans for remediation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the embargoed papers.

The Loughs Agency representatives joined the meeting at 10:58am

6. Oral briefing - the Loughs Agency

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr JP O'Doherty, Director of Corporate Services;
- Mr Ciarán McGonigle, Director of Agriculture and Shellfisheries; and
- Dr Sarah McLean, Head of Science.

The Committee was briefed on the range of activities undertaken by the Agency in delivering sustainable social, economic and environmental benefits through the conservation, management, promotion and development of the fisheries and marine resources within the Foyle and Carlingford areas.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard concerns that Foyle salmon stocks are under threat and have declining since the early 1980's.

The Committee heard that preference is to deter non-compliance through education and promoting personal responsibility and sustainable management rather than enforcement.

The Committee also heard of the dual challenges of climate change and bio diversity loss due to the changing eco system.

The Committee heard how the Agency, through its scientific research in collaboration with other bodies, can find ways to address the challenges they face.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

Tom Buchanan MLA left the meeting at 11:44am

The Lough Agency representatives left the meeting at 11:57am

The Waterways Ireland representatives joined the meeting at 11:58am

7. Oral briefing – Waterways Ireland

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr John McDonagh, CEO;

- Mr Garret McGrath, Regional Manager;
- Mr John Tolan, Marketing and Development Controller; and
- Mrs Paula Treacy, Head of Environment & Heritage

The Committee was briefed on the work undertaken as a cross border body responsible for the management, maintenance, development, and restoration of inland navigable waterways.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard of the transformational projects underway, including the Ulster Canal Greenway and the Erne System.

The Committee heard that the Waterways Ireland has a strong equality and diversity plan which promotes accessibility for all users.

The Committee also heard that the significant decline in water quality would lead to lower levels of tourism and domestic usage, impacting health benefits and the wider social value placed on the waterways and work must be done to address this issue.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The Waterways Ireland representatives left the meeting at 1.04pm

8. SR 2025/101 The Farming with Nature Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee noted it received an oral briefing on the SL1 at its meeting of 29 May, when it heard that the Department intended to make this SR to provide it with the legal powers to implement the Farming with Nature Transition Scheme, providing a package of support for farmers to increase the extent of habitats across farmed land in Northern Ireland.

The Committee also noted that the Scheme provides for payments to be made by DAERA to eligible farm businesses in relation to undertaking specific environmental actions on eligible farmed land.

The Committee noted that there have been no changes to the SR since the SL1 was submitted to the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it had considered SR 2025/101 The Farming with Nature Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and had no objection to the Rule, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

9. SR 2025/000 The Environmental Protection (Disposal of Polychlorinated Biphenyls and other Dangerous Substances) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee noted it received an oral briefing on the SL1 at its meeting of 8 May and heard that the Department intended to make this SR for the implementation of amendments to The Environmental Protection Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000; to enable NI to comply with Stockholm Convention and ongoing alignment with EU Persistent Organic Pollutant (POPs) legislation, as required under the Windsor Framework.

The Committee noted that the SR would bring Northern Ireland in line with GB.

The Committee noted that there have been no changes to the SR since the SL1 was submitted to the Committee and it will be laid before the Assembly under the draft affirmative procedure and the ESR has not drawn it to the special attention of the Assembly in her 41st Report.

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

10.SR 2025/102 The Scallop Enhancement Sites (Prohibited Methods of Fishing) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee noted it received an oral briefing on the SL1 at its meeting of 22 May and heard that the Department intended to make this SR to prohibit fishing for sea-fish by demersal mobile fishing gear and diving for scallops in four sites in the Northern Ireland zone which have been established as scallop re-seeding sites.

The Committee noted there have been no changes to the SR since the SL1 was submitted to the Committee

The Committee noted the SR will be laid before the Assembly under the negative resolution procedure and, subject to Executive approval, it is anticipated that it will come into operation on 1st July.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it had considered SR 2025/102 The Scallop Enhancement Sites (Prohibited Methods of Fishing) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and had no objection to the Rule, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

11. Correspondence.

The Committee considered the Correspondence memo.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence and actions as listed in the memo.

The Committee considered correspondence from Dr Kirsten Dunbar, the President of the Northern Ireland Veterinary Association (NIVA).

The Committee noted the NIVA have written to the Chair of the Veterinary Medicines Working Group outlining their concerns about the supply of veterinary medicines to Northern Ireland following the end of the grace period.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance, dated 5 June regarding an invitation to the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council launch of its Sustainability Report, with a special focus on Water on Tuesday 10 June at the Ulster University Belfast Campus.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note

The Committee considered and noted copied correspondence from the HoL Select Committee to Defra at its meeting on 22 May and Defra has now provided responses to those HoL Committee queries relating to the following matters:

- COM (2023) 769: Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the welfare of dogs and cats and their traceability.
- C (2024) 661: Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) supplementing Regulation (EU) 2019/6 of the European Parliament and of the Council by laying down rules on appropriate measures to ensure the effective and safe use of veterinary medicinal products.
- PE - 72/1/2023 REV-1: Regulation (EU) 2024/1143 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 11 April 2024 on geographical indications for wine, spirit drinks and agricultural products, as well as traditional specialities.
- COM (2023) 770: Proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the protection of animals during transport and related operations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered the 41st Report of the Examiner of Statutory Reports.

The Committee noted the report refers to the following SRs of relevance to the Committee which are not required to be drawn to the special attention of the Assembly:

Draft S.R.: The Environmental Protection (Disposal of Polychlorinated Biphenyls and other Dangerous Substances) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

S.R. 2025/81: The Quality of Bathing Water (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 6 June, regarding the Public Consultation on the draft Third Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme (NICCAP3) and also noted a copy of the consultation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Economy, dated 6 June, regarding Overgrown Trees - Landowner Liability – an issue of concern at the concurrent meeting on 28 May. The Committee for the Economy agreed to write to DAERA seeking clarity on this issue .

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the letter to DAERA from Economy Committee.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 5 June, regarding an 8 week public consultation commenced on 9 June in relation to Shaping Sustainable Places (SSP) - a major capital investment regeneration programme with a coordinated focus on village, town and city centres.

The Committee noted if approved by the Executive, the SSP, anticipated to commence in January 2026, will have DfC, DfI and DAERA each contributing a minimum of £50m over 10 years for regeneration interventions, with an additional £15m contributed by local councils.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered the report from Criminal Justice Inspection Northern Ireland's (CJI's) titled: An inspection of offence investigation and criminal case processing by Northern Ireland Departments and Organisations.

The Committee noted the report examined how well criminal cases were investigated and processed by six Government authorities and organisations which includes the Veterinary Service Animal Health within DAERA.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

13. Any Other Business

None

14. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on Thursday 19th June at 10.00am in Parliament Buildings

The meeting was adjourned at 1:09pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated