



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

## Minutes of Proceedings

**11 September 2025**

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

**Via Zoom:** Daniel McCrossan MLA  
Áine Murphy MLA

**Apologies:** None

**In Attendance:** Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk  
Glenda Doherty, Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor  
Sarah Preece, Clerical Officer

***The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:03 am***

The Chair welcomed Daniel McCrossan to the Committee replacing Patsy McGlone who has moved to the Justice Committee. The Chair also welcomed Glenda Doherty to the Committee Team.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write a letter of thanks to Patsy McGlone for all his work during his time on the Committee.

**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.

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

William Irwin MLA declared an interest as a partner in a farm business.

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

**3. Chairperson's Business**

The Chair referred to a briefing note summarising the Informal Meeting on 22 July with Government of Ireland Minister of State at the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Timmy Dooley.

The Committee noted the discussion had covered a range of issues of common interest such as combating climate change, protecting biodiversity and fishing.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Chair referred to an invitation from the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce to attend the Annual Renewable Gas Conference on 23 October at the Titanic Hotel

Belfast and an offer to host the Committee meeting as the conference will discuss issues of interest to the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to hold the Committee meeting at the Titanic Hotel Belfast on 23 October.

The Chair referred to correspondence from Diana Armstrong MLA, dated 21 August, regarding farmers concern for the future of agri-environment support in Northern Ireland as EFS Group Projects are due to end. Members shared the concerns, noting that this is a country wide issue facing farmers and that a letter should be sent to the Department to highlight the Committee concerns.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department highlighting its concern and requesting that it provide an update to the Committee on how its intends to address these issues.

The Chair referred to correspondence dated 7 July from the Speaker regarding the laying of a Public Petition titled 'Stop the Nutrients Action Programme' in the Assembly on 30 June.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Chair referred to correspondence, dated 10 July, from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) regarding its briefing on "The environment, human rights & the Windsor Framework" which sets out its advice and recommendations.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Chair referred to correspondence, dated 18 August, from the Department regarding the DAERA Business Plan 2025-26.

The Committee noted the Plan outlines key commitments for the year ahead and is aligned with the Programme for Government (PfG).

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request a briefing from Officials on the Business Plan and how it links to the PfG.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request that any Departmental policy briefings going forward clearly highlight the links to the Business Plan and PfG.

The Chair referred to an invitation on behalf of Enva Ltd for the Committee to receive a briefing and a tour of its new Fridge recycling facility in Toomebridge.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to add Enva Ltd to the list of potential visits.

The Chair referred to correspondence from the RSPB NI, dated 17 August, requesting the opportunity to brief the Committee, regarding its concern for the future of agri-environment support in Northern Ireland in the absence of a scheme to replace the soon to be expired EFS Higher Level agreements.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to add the RSPB to the list of briefings.

The Chair referred to a draft letter it had requested the Clerk to prepare to Ms Kellie Armstrong MLA, Chair of the Committee for Procedures. The correspondence requested that the Procedures Committee considers a review of the LCM process as a priority, highlighting the need for improved scrutiny time and resources which was raised during the Committee's scrutiny of the Animal Welfare Bill LCM.

The Chair stated that he is a member of the Committee for Procedures.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to issue the letter as drafted.

The Chair referred to correspondence dated 1 September from the Northern Ireland Environmental Link calling for an independent analysis of the economic impacts of the NAP proposals.

The Committee noted that the Committee Team are underway with planning a NAP stakeholder event.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Chair referred to correspondence, dated 9 September, from the Minister regarding the Delineation of Ministerial Responsibilities in relation to the movement of animals to and from Northern Ireland. The Committee noted the Minister has now been advised by the Defra Minister the measures of disease control and animal movement in relation to Animal Health Law that he has direction and control over.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Chair referred to the Minister's Oral Statement delivered in Plenary on 9 September regarding the North South Ministerial Council Environment Sectoral Meeting on 4 July 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Chair referred to the Minister's Oral Statement delivered in Plenary on 9 September regarding the NSMC Aquaculture and Marine Sectoral Meeting on 4 July 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Chair referred to the Minister's Oral Statement delivered in Plenary on 9 September regarding the NSMC Agriculture Sectoral Meeting on 20 June 2025

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Chair referred to the 'Nip it in the Bud' campaign run by The Farming Community Network (FCN) and supported by Macmillan Cancer. The Committee noted the campaign encourages farmers and people living in rural communities to be aware of symptoms and if necessary get checked for early signs of cancer.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note and to share the information via social media and other methods.

#### **4. Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2025 were agreed and signed by the Chair to be published.

**Agreed:** The Minutes were agreed.

## **5. Matters Arising**

The Chair referred to a response, dated 8 August, from the Minister to the Committee's letter of 27 June on the A5 Western Transport Corridor Scheme, collaboration between DfI and DAERA in reviewing the High Court Judgment and setting out the next steps.

The Committee noted that DAERA and DfI are working closely to review the judgment and its implications and DfI and LPS officials have written to landowners setting out their plans to manage the process for reinstatement and restoration of the vested lands.

Members expressed concern that farmers are still dealing with uncertainty and again raised the issues of poor communication and a lack of collaboration between DAERA and DfI and called for clarity from Minister Muir regarding his decision to formally intervene in the appeal lodged by the Minister for Infrastructure. The Committee noted that cross Committee collaboration with the Committee for Infrastructure on this issue should be continued building on the previous concurrent meetings.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Committee for Infrastructure and to consider a further concurrent meeting to discuss the issue.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister asking that he work with the farmers impacted to resolve this issue and to request that the Committee is updated on the current status of the A5 scheme and detail what collaboration there has been with him and the Minister for Infrastructure.

The Chair referred to a response, dated 24 July, from the Minister in response to its letter of 3 July regarding Encirc's concerns in relation to the Glass Extender Producer Responsibility (pEPR) Policy. The Committee noted that the response states that the Minister has met with and will continue to engage with Encirc and has written to Defra regarding the potential impact of pEPR on local industry.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note and forward the correspondence to Encirc.

The Chair referred to a response from the Department regarding correspondence, dated 24 July from the Department in response to our letter of 3 July regarding Environmental Protection (Single-use Vapes) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and councils concerns regarding their enforcement role.

The Committee noted that Officials remain committed to finding a solution and that Councils designation as ‘authorised persons’ was an administrative easement in the event that Councils agreed to undertake an enforcement role. The Committee also noted that councils have yet to provide their costs assessment.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the response.

The Chair referred to email correspondence from an individual, dated 28 July, regarding concerns in relation to the Craigmore Road landfill site.

The Committee noted that it previously considered this matter on 19 June and 25 June and wrote to NIEA requesting the details of odour complaints received in relation to the site, details of any NIEA officers’ odour assessment visits and details of the methodology used. The Committee then considered NIEA’s response on 3 July and agreed to forward it to the individual for information.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

***The Officials joined the meeting at 10:32am***

## **6. Departmental Oral Evidence Session - Overview of Policy Proposals for the Sustainable Farming Investment Scheme**

The following Officials from Sustainable Agri-Food Development Division (SAFDD) briefed the Committee:

- Alison Chambers, Director
- Brenda Cuning, Future Investment Measures Policy Branch,

The Officials gave an overview of proposals for the new Scheme, which is being developed as part of the Sustainable Agriculture Programme and will aim to support on-farm investment for farm businesses to improve their environmental performance and business efficiency providing a high volume of investment support via a quick and straight-forward scheme.

A question and answer session then followed.

The Committee heard that the Department has engaged with Defra and DAFM and has taken on lesson learned from their experiences of similar schemes.

In response to a Members query regarding funding, Officials advised that the proposals are still subject to business case approval and budget availability and that finance will not be coming out of earmarked funds. A penalty for decommitment will also be included to assist budget management although it is not anticipated that this will be a significant issue.

The Committee heard that the Department intends to have extensive communication and pre-engagement with potential applicants prior to introduction which is anticipated to be late 2025.

The Chair thanked Officials for their attendance.

***The Officials left the meeting at 11:02am***

***The RalSe Official joined the meeting at 11:03am***

## **7. Briefing from Research and Information Service (RalSe) Briefing - Aquaculture overview – UK and Ireland**

The following RalSe official briefed the Committee:

- Mark Allen

The Committee were briefed on an overview of the scale of and value of aquaculture, the support provided to the sector and details on strategies/policy interventions with a focus on growing aquaculture within the UK and Ireland.

A question and answer session then followed.



The Committee heard that the forthcoming Northern Ireland Fisheries and Water Environment Bill may have the potential to enhance local aquaculture development and the Environmental Improvement Plan also includes considerations relating to marine based aquaculture, but a number of key interlinked policies/strategies have yet to be finalised.

The Committee heard that an increase in funding and a move from annual funding to a more strategically minded five to ten year scheme could help to unlock growth in the sector in Northern Ireland.

The Chair thanked the RalSe Official for his attendance.

***The meeting was suspended at 11:28am***

***The meeting resumed at 11:42am***

## **8. Dilapidation Bill**

The Committee discussed an extension of the Committee Stage as the Call for Evidence is still open and in consideration of the timetabling of other Committee business.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to lay the motion in the Business Office to request extension of the Committee Stage to 15 May 2026 but also agreed to complete as early as possible.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to publish a media release reminding the public of the Call for Evidence.

## **9. SR 2025/126 The Environmental Protection (Single-use Vapes) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025**

The Committee noted it had received an oral briefing at its meeting on 19 June and heard that the Department intended to make the SR to provide it with additional enforcement powers and ensuring the ban on single-use vapes is applied equitably in Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted the SR will be laid before the Assembly under the negative resolution procedure and, subject to Executive approval will come into operation on 29 July 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it had considered SR 2025/126 The Environmental Protection (Single-use Vapes) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and had no objection to the Rule, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

#### **10. SR 2025/141 The Eel Fishing (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025**

The Committee noted it received an oral briefing at its meeting on 19 June and heard that the Department intended to make the SR to promote more sustainable management of the Lough Neagh eel fishery through three measures - revision of existing fishing seasons; providing a mechanism for DAERA to set catch limits on the brown and silver eel fisheries; and setting a maximum catch length.

The SR will be laid before the Assembly under the negative resolution procedure and, subject to Executive approval, it is anticipated that it came into operation on 1 January 2026.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it had considered SR 2025/141 The Eel Fishing (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and had no objection to the Rule, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

#### **11. Departmental Written Briefing - NIEA Fees and Charges Inflationary Uplift 2025-2026**

The Committee noted that there will be an increase of 6.19% in NIEA regulatory fees and charges to ensure that chargeable activities are fully cost recovered in line with the requirements of Managing Public Money Northern Ireland. A Member queried if the increase in fees would result in a corresponding improvement in response times to queries made to NIEA, in particular regarding planning applications.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department for a further update on the issues raised previously regarding improving planning application response times through increased staff and resources issues and an update on any new processes to improve performance that have been implemented the Committee was briefed on 24 October 2024.

## **12. Departmental Written Briefing – NIEA Business Plan 2025-26**

The Committee noted that the briefing outlines the Plan's targets, including delivery linked to key Ministerial Priorities to address the ongoing threats to nature and water quality in Northern Ireland. It also sets out the three NIEA Key Priorities of Environmental Regulation, Protection and Enforcement; Water Quality; and Nature Recovery and has a total of 17 targets.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the briefing.

## **13. Departmental Written Briefing - The Northern Ireland Food Animal Information System (NIFAIS) Stage Two Update.**

The Committee noted that NIFAIS is an IT Project to replace, in stages, the legacy Animal and Public Health Information System (APHIS) used by Veterinary Service Animal Health Group, as well as the wider agri-food sector to deliver full traceability, disease control and public health functions.

The Committee noted that following delivery of Stage 1 in September 2023, Stage 2 has been delivered by the Supplier and is now going through final testing with an expected release of 6 October 2025 for all users.

Members highlighted that alternative paper based arrangements should be available at Marts to avoid any issues due to any potential loss of electricity supply causing the animal information systems to be unavailable.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ensure there are alternative arrangements in place at Marts should electricity supply be lost.

## **14. Correspondence.**

The Committee considered the items in the correspondence memo.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the proposed actions and then considered items in more detail.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 3 July, regarding the Consultation launch of the draft Round 4 Industry Noise Action Plan that ran from 3 July to 28 August.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 4 July, regarding EU Animal Health Law (AHL)- Equines.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 4 July, from the Department regarding the Launch on 30 June of a Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) on the Sustainable Utilisation Of Layer Manure (SULM).

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 3 July, from the Department regarding Publication of the Northern Ireland Fisheries and Water Environment Bill Consultation which ran from 3rd July to 11 September.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 18 July, from the Department regarding its intention to launch a 16-week Consultation on the Setting Of The Fourth Carbon Budget (CB4) for the Period 2038-2042.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 18 July, from the Department regarding two UK Emissions Trading Scheme Scope Expansion Consultation responses.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 18 July, from the Department regarding Publication of an Interim Authority Response to 'UK Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) Scope Expansion: Maritime'

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered a memo, dated 3 July, from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy regarding The Insolvency (Amendment) Bill – Call for Evidence and noted that Committee responses are requested by 30 September.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the Bill and that Members would respond from Party positions.

The Committee considered an email reminder that Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive Review Committee's 'Call for Evidence' for its review on Cross-Cutting Executive Strategies will close on 30th September.

The Committee noted that at its meeting of 3 June it had agreed that a draft response would be presented to the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence and consider a draft response at the meeting of 18 September.

The Committee considered a memo, dated 3 July, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding Budget 2026-2029/30 Information Gathering seeking returns from all departments to inform the Executive's consideration of Budget 2026/27 - 2029/30, setting the resource budgets for 2026-27 to 2028-29 and capital budgets for 2026-27 to 2029-30.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the memo.

The Committee considered a memo, dated 3 July, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding NI Fiscal Council – Spending Review Assessment.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the memo.

The Committee considered the following Annual Report and Accounts:

- DAERA' Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25;
- Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board - Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25;
- The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute - Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25;
- The Forest Service - Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25 ;
- The Livestock and Meat Commission for NI - Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25;
- The Northern Ireland Environment Agency - Annual Report and Accounts 2024-25;

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the reports.

The Committee considered a number of items of correspondence, dated 17 July, it has been copied into from the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee to Defra, providing further updates on a range of matters within the scope of the Windsor Framework.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered the NI Fiscal Council - Public Expenditure Databank - July 2025 providing outturn data for the spending of Executive departments, and the overall financing and spending of the Executive for its DEL spending.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence from Investment Strategy Northern Ireland (ISNI), dated 27 July, regarding the Investing Activity Report for the Department for July 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence and report.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 28 July, from Cabragh Concerned Residents Association to NIEA regarding Biofilter Maintenance at Cabragh Site.

The Committee noted it had received a considerable amount of correspondence on waste and odour matters and a RalSe paper on odour detection methods is due before the end of September.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence and arrange a planning session to discuss the matter in more detail.

The Committee considered correspondence from an individual, dated 31 July, regarding Safe Bathing Water Northern Ireland and calling for DAERA to publish clearly where swimmers can swim safely.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered email correspondence, from an Individual dated 14 August, regarding Public Confidence in NIEA's Handling of Waste Regulation in Northern Ireland. The Committee noted the complaints concerning specific waste operators associated with Re-Gen Waste Ltd facilities.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 1 September from an Individual to NIEA regarding what is described as Material Non-Compliance and Regulatory Failures at Warrenpoint Port.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 11 August and 26 August, that the Committee has been copied into from an Individual to the Crown Estate regarding concerns in relation to Dalradian Gold Ltd. The Chair declared that following a previous visit to the Dalradian Gold Ltd site he had been referred to the

Standards Committee but that the Standards Commissioner had not had any concerns and made no recommendations.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered email correspondence, dated 22 August, that the Committee has been copied into from an Individual to the NIEA regarding concerns in relation to Dalradian Gold Ltd.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 26 August, that the Committee has been copied into from an Individual regarding a FOI request to the NIO in relation to Environmental Information Regulations 2004.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered further correspondence, dated 27 August, from CCRA regarding Biofilter Maintenance Works at Sawgrass.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 13 August, from APB UK and a copy of its report titled Prism 2030 Programme - Year 2 Report.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered a number of items laid in the Business office on 16 August:

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the items.

The Committee considered an invitation from the University of Ulster to the Launch of The Imaginarium Exhibition on Tuesday 16 September at W5, Belfast.



**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the invitation.

### **15. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee discussed the draft Forward Work Programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to publish the Forward Work Programme

### **16. Any Other Business**

The Deputy Chair highlighted that it is Rural Crime week and wished to highlight the impact of crime on rural communities and commended the work of the Rural Crime Partnership (RCP).

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to add the RCP to the list of potential briefings Partnership.

### **17 Date and Time of Next Meeting**

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on Thursday 18 September in Room 21, Parliament Buildings at 10:00am.

***The meeting was adjourned at 12:09pm***

**Signature:** .....

**Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson**

**Dated** .....