



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

## Minutes of Proceedings

11 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  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Gareth Wilson MLA

**Via Zoom:** Aoife Finnegan MLA  
Áine Murphy MLA  
Daniel McCrossan 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 10:08am***

**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.

Michelle McIlveen MLA declared an interest in agenda item 6 as she is an Honorary Associate of the British Veterinary Association.

**3. Chairperson's Business**

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Department, dated 8 June, requesting an additional Committee meeting on Tuesday 30 June to consider a series of Climate Action Plan (CAP) briefings on agriculture; Land Use - Land Use Change - and Forestry (LULUCF); and fisheries and waste.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to hold the additional meeting at 10am on Tuesday 30 June from 10am until 12pm to consider a series of CAP briefings.

The Chairperson referred to a draft note of the informal meeting held on 8 June between Members of the Committee, Department Officials, NIMEA and the Ulster Farmers Union to discuss the outstanding issues regarding The Sheep Carcase Classification and Price Reporting Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

The Committee noted that Officials stated that they will consider the issues raised at the informal meeting and, where necessary, seek further information from NIMEA, with a view to progressing the SR in the Autumn.

**Agreed:** The Committee was content with the note of the informal meeting as drafted, and agreed share it with all stakeholders present at the meeting.

The Chairperson referred to the response from the Secretary of State, dated 9 June, regarding the impact of the rising cost of fuel on the farming sector and rural communities.

The Committee noted that the response states that the UK Government recognises rising fuel prices have been felt disproportionately across the economy, with farmers facing significantly increased costs and highlighted a range of support measures and details of further cost-of-living and business supports.

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

The Chairperson referred to the Anaerobic Digestion (AD) event at the Stormont Hotel on 4 June and thanked the Committee team and the Engagement team for organising the event and to those Members and Stakeholders who attended.

The Committee noted the event was well attended and well received by around 45 representatives from the environmental, energy and agricultural sectors and a wide range of views were expressed which will inform ongoing work on AD.

The Committee noted that it will be provided with a note of the event at the next meeting and a stakeholder feedback survey has been issued.

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

#### **4. Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 4 June 2026.

#### **5. Matters Arising**

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 3 June, regarding its request for clarification on collaborative frameworks supporting Green Growth initiatives with the Department for the Economy (DfE).

The Committee noted it had considered the DfE response at its previous meeting.

The Committee noted the response detailed areas of collaboration, including The Interdepartmental Biomethane Group (IDBG); The DAERA Climate Change Programme Board; DfE representation on the Sustainable Utilisation of Livestock Slurry (SULS) project board; and DAERA and DfE Energy Strategy meetings.

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

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 2 June, into the request for clarification on matters regarding funding for Council Delivered Non-Farmed Animal Welfare Enforcement.

The Committee noted that in 2023, due to 2023/24 budget constraints and no Ministers in place, the Permanent Secretary decided not to fund councils that year.

The Committee also noted in April 2024, the Minister provided £625k to councils to cover some enforcement costs from 2023/24 but advised Fermanagh and Omagh District Council that similar funding was unlikely to be available in future.

The Committee noted in relation to specific bids for 2026/27 and future intentions to bid for funding, there will be no scope due to the need to fund bTB Compensation and the Department does not intend to provide funding or make a bid going forward.

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

The Committee considered a response, dated 4 June, from the Department regarding Stakeholder Engagement in Green Growth and Environmental Management.

The Committee noted that NIEA stated it is working with DAERA colleagues delivering the SULS project as a consultee to AD planning applications.

The Committee also noted since June 2025 NIEA has been consulted on twelve AD applications, out of which it was content with four, with seven applications containing insufficient information, and one which required clarification.

The Committee noted the Department does not therefore support the assumption that the NIEA largely objects to AD applications due to potential impacts of ammonia on the natural environment.

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

***The NIPSA representatives joined the meeting at 10:17am***

***John Blair MLA joined the meeting at 10:20am***

## **6. Briefing with Northern Ireland Public Service Alliance (NIPSA) - Veterinary Inspectors (VI) Pay and Grading Dispute**

The Committee noted it considered the matter on 30 April and agreed to hear directly from NIPSA on the issues concerning the Veterinary Inspectors' pay and grading dispute. The Committee noted there are wider issues beyond those within the control of the DAERA Minister as it also involves the Department for Finance, which holds responsibility for NICS HR matters.

The Committee also noted that DAERA operates as the principal competent authority for plant and animal health controls at Northern Ireland Ports which has implications under the Windsor Framework for veterinary inspectors conducting checks at the ports.

The following NIPSA representatives briefed the Committee:

- Ms Maria Morgan, Deputy General Secretary;
- Alan Law, Assistant Secretary; and
- Abigail Armstrong, NIPSA Representative

The Committee heard details of the work undertaken by veterinary staff and details of the background to the dispute, resulting from issues arising due to a delay in a grade evaluation exercise until 2024 and the Departments lack of adherence to NICS policy regarding job evaluation.

The Committee heard that the issue has led to equal pay vulnerability and the loss of vets choosing to work in the Republic of Ireland, rather than in NI, for better salaries.

The Committee heard that NIPSA had been calling for meaningful and timely engagement with DAERA at an earlier stage. A question and answer session followed, and topics of discussion included:

- Concerns at the long history of the matter and the seeming lack of urgency level of from DAERA;
- The impact and consequences of industrial action on food security; animal health and welfare functions; public health protections; disease control; and delays in responses to emergency calls;
- Concerns of the impact on morale and recruitment and retention of veterinary staff; and
- The cost implications due to the reliance on agency staff.

The Chair thanked the NIPSA representatives for their attendance.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister to ask the reason for the delay until 18 May in responding to correspondence from NIPSA issued on 26 March seeking engagement; the rationale for the Department seemingly not following NICS job evaluation protocols for the period from 2020 to 2024; and a request for a timeline for the anticipated resolution of the dispute

***The NIPSA representatives left the meeting at 11:01am***

***The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11:02am***

## **7. Departmental Pre-introduction Oral Briefing -The Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill**

***This agenda item was recorded by Hansard***

The Committee noted last week that it was notified that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have approved the introduction of the Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill to the Assembly and that today we would receive a pre-introductory briefing from Officials.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Owen Lyttle – Director, Marine and Fisheries Division;

- Colin Armstrong – Deputy Director (policy and legislation) Marine and Fisheries Division;
- Tommy McCormic - Bill Team Official; and
- Alison McCaw - Bill Team Official.

The Committee were given a high level briefing of the Bill prior to its introduction and heard that the intention of the Bill is to ensure fisheries policies aligned to the fisheries management framework are provided for in legislation for both the marine and aquatic environment, and to develop policies to improve water quality and ecosystem health, promote sustainable fish stocks, and ensure appropriate enforcement measures.

The Bill will provide the legislative basis for Inland fisheries ecosystem-based management; Inland and Sea Fisheries Enforcement; Protection of the water environment; and Aquaculture.

The Committee heard there was an intention that predated Brexit to update and modernise the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966. A question and answer session followed, and topics of discussion included:

- Provision of an extensive list of definitions on the face of the Bill to provide clarity;
- How the Bill will align with other ecological objectives and any impact on the River Basin Management Plans;
- The potential impact of SORPI on the legislation and the wider issue of water quality;
- Stakeholder engagement with Hydro operators; and
- How the 1966 Act will sit alongside the provisions in the Bill

Committee highlighted to Officials that, in light of its experience with the Dilapidation Bill, it would be of assistance to be provided with a table to show what powers are new, which are modernised and where they have been devised based on the more recent legislation; and also a table showing the offences and what level they were before, which are new offences and what the proposals are now. In addition, clarity should be provided as to how the Bill, once enacted, would sit alongside the 1966 Act.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

***The Chairperson left the meeting at 11:25am and the Deputy Chair took the Chair.***

***The Chairperson returned to the meeting at 11:30am and resumed duties of the Chair.***

***The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11:35am***

***The meeting was suspended at 11:35am***

***The meeting resumed at 11:52am***

## **8. Hunting with Dogs Bill**

The Committee considered a draft copy of the Citizen Space questions.

**Agreed:** The Committee were content with the Citizen Space questions as drafted and agreed to issue the Survey as soon as possible.

**Agreed:** The Committee were content that the survey runs for 10 weeks, compared to the eight weeks for the ANC (Payments) Bill survey, to allow for the holiday period in July.

The Committee considered a draft copy of the stakeholder list.

**Agreed:** The Committee were content with the list as drafted.

The Committee considered a draft timetable for consideration of the three Bills that are anticipated to be going through the Committee stage by September.

The Committee noted the timetable includes extra meetings on Tuesdays from 15 September and also noted that additional stakeholder evidence sessions, beyond those timetabled for each Bill, may need to be considered for informal stakeholder events.

**Agreed:** The Committee was content with the draft timetable subject to possible revision in September based on further Bill Office advice.

The Chair commented on the potential issue regarding Committee Team resources, due to the volume of Bills to be considered before the end of the Mandate.

**Agreed:** The Committee was content for the Chair to write to Chair Liaison Group highlighting its concerns regarding staff resources.

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 noted that at the previous meeting some concerns were raised regarding the proposed date.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to propose a motion to extend the Committee Stage to 5 February 2027.

### **9. Departmental Written Briefing - Strategic Investment Board's Independent Review of the Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation (TRPSI) Framework**

The Committee noted the Framework was launched in 2016 to support a range of measures to help address financial poverty, tackle poverty, and social isolation in rural areas. The Committee noted the final Framework review report has informed the development of the Department's new draft rural policy, 'Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041', which has three core objectives:

- To improve the scope, relevance, accessibility and timeliness of rural research, statistics and other evidence and their use across government;
- To inform, influence and support strategic government policy from a rural perspective; and
- To promote and support innovative, collaborative government action on rural challenges and opportunities.

The Committee noted it also includes a proposal for a new Rural Collaboration Fund to facilitate collaboration between DAERA and other NI government departments to tackle rural challenges.

The Committee noted Officials are scheduled to provide an oral briefing to the Committee on the policy on 2 July and will publish a Summary of Responses report later this summer.

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

### **10. Departmental Written Briefing - The Materials Facilities Charging Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2027**

The Committee noted that the Department intends to introduce a charging scheme providing for an annual subsistence fee of £3,000 from 1 April 2027 for Materials Facilities (MFs) sites that:

- operate under a waste licence or permit;
- handle over 1,000 tonnes of waste annually; and
- fall within the MF definition and relevant Code of Practice.

The Committee noted no new legislation is required as there are existing powers under the Waste (Materials Facilities) Regulations (NI) 2025, which it approved on 27 February 2025, which introduced mandatory sampling and reporting at MF sites and allowed introduction via a charging scheme.

The Committee noted the fee, which will be reviewed annually and adjusted for inflation or increased costs, ensures full cost recovery for regulatory activity conducted by the NIEA and will align Northern Ireland with the rest of the UK

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

### **11. SR 2026/105 - The Farming with Nature Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Committee noted 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 two of the Farming with Nature Transition Scheme.

The Committee noted on 7 May it agreed to issue a Call for Views, which received no responses, and on 4 June it held an oral evidence session with Officials and agreed it was content to support the SR as drafted.

The Committee noted that the Department has advised that there have been no changes to policy content since the SL1 was submitted to the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed it has no objection to the SR subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

The Committee then agreed to move to agenda item 16, noting it was a late addition to the agenda as the Committee Team received the ESR report after the main Pack was issued.

## **16. SR 2026/XXXX - The Mandatory Use of Closed Circuit Television in Slaughterhouses Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Committee noted the Department submitted the SL1 and draft SR to the Committee on 9 February, to make a new regulation under the draft affirmative procedure to mandate the use of Closed-Circuit Television in slaughterhouses which handle live animals and on 19 February, it agreed to issue a Call for Views which closed on 4 March, with no responses submitted.

The Committee noted on 19 March, following an oral briefing from Officials, it agreed to support the SR as drafted in the debate in the Assembly, which then did not go ahead due to a typographical drafting error as highlighted by the ESR in her report. A corrected draft SR was then laid on 3 June.

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

## **12. Correspondence**

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

Correspondence from the Department dated 5 June regarding the launch on 28 May of the public appointments process for the Just Transition Commission which will run until 25 June.

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

Correspondence from the Department regarding the commencement of the Consultation on the Draft Air Quality (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026, which will run from 8 June to 31 August.

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

Correspondence from the Department, dated 5 June, regarding the Public Consultation on the proposed introduction of fixed fees for providing Screening and Scoping Opinions under the Marine Works (Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA)) Regulations 2007.

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

A memo dated 4 June from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding the HM Treasury Open Book Review of Northern Ireland Executive Budget.

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

Correspondence dated 5 June, from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy reminding all Committees views for the Petroleum Exploration and Licensing (Repeal) Bill by 24 June.

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

Correspondence that the Committee has been copied into between Defra and the Chair of the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee regarding Detergents Surfactants and Repealing Regulations; and certain production, labelling and certification rules and certain rules on trade with third countries.

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

The 68th ESR Report, dated 9 June, drawing the special attention of the Assembly to the draft SR The Mandatory Use of Closed Circuit Television in Slaughterhouses Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 in relation to a typographical error.

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

Correspondence dated 2 June, from the Young Farmers Clubs AERA Committee requesting to meet with the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to add the Young Farmers Clubs AERA Committee to its list of potential briefings.

Correspondence from the Dogs Trust regarding its concerns at the delay in legislation regarding the Sale and supply of puppies and kittens,' seeking an update from Minister and a clear timeline of next steps.

The Committee noted it considered a response from the Department, on 5 March, on the matter.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the Departments response to the Dogs Trust.

Correspondence from NI Water offering to brief the Committee after recess on its PC28 submission.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request a written briefing in the first instance.

### **13. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

The Committee noted that last week it discussed an additional meeting to take evidence on the issues around the export of poultry litter and to consider inviting Shared Environmental Services (SES), NI Poultry Federation (to represent the egg producers) and the UFU

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to invite the stakeholders to give evidence at an informal meeting at 10am in the Senate on Tuesday 23rd June.

The Chair referred to the forthcoming Committee meeting on 25 June at the Portaferry Hotel, with briefings from NIFPO and ANIFPO, a visit to the DAERA supported Seal Rescue and Rehabilitation Centre, and then a visit to Portavogie Harbour to meet the Harbourmaster and local fishermen.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that Members would arrange individual transport to the external meeting on 25 June.

### **14. Any Other Business**

Members raised concerns regarding the economic impact and animal welfare implications for Northern Ireland pig producers affected by ongoing uncertainty around supply contracts for Sofina Foods.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to offer an informal meeting with the Ulster Farmers Union Pig Committee to discuss the matter.

**15. Date and Time of Next Meeting**

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 18 June at 10:00am in Room 21 Parliament Buildings.

***The meeting was adjourned 12:10pm***

**Signature:** .....

**Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson**

**Dated** .....