Northern Ireland Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

12 November 2026

Meeting location: Room 30 Parliament Buildings

Present: Diana Armstrong (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
Aoife Finnegan MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Áine Murphy MLA
Gareth Wilson MLA

Via Zoom: Daniel McCrossan MLA joined the meeting at 10:16am

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:11am

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.

The Chairperson declared an interest due to having a farming background.

Declan McAleer MLA declared an interest in the Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill as the Bill Sponsor.

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

Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting at 10:13am

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Minister, dated 6 November, providing notification of the oral statement he made to the Assembly on 9 November relating to COP31 A Turning Point for Climate Action.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Minister, dated 9 November, providing notification of the oral statement he made to the Assembly on Tuesday 10 November regarding the publication of the report of the Independent external review into the livestock culling operation near Fivemiletown.

The Committee considered the note of the informal meeting between the Minister, the Chairperson, and the Deputy Chair on 10 November to discuss the report in advance of his statement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note as it would be briefed by officials on the report and the Department's response to it later in the meeting.

The Chairperson referred to the informal meeting on 8 October with Max Bryant, the CEO and Christopher McAteer the Environmental Strategy & Advocacy Manager for Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) to discuss its work, and that one of the items discussed was the concept of natural capital.

The Committee considered a copy of the NIEL report titled - Putting Nature at the Heart of Decisions Protecting, Managing and Enhancing Natural Systems.

The Committee noted it had considered the concept of natural capital previously and had been briefed by RaISe officials on its report titled Public Estate Value to Society on 1 May 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Michelle McIlveen MLA joined the meeting at 10:15am

Daniel McCrossan MLA joined the meeting by zoom at 10:16am

Tom Buchanan MLA joined the meeting at 10:23am

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 5 November 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 4 November, regarding the Digital Waste Tracking Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

The Committee noted on 22 October, following a briefing from Officials, it agreed it was not yet content to support the draft SR until it received an update on the Department's engagement with stakeholders, including businesses, in border areas who will be affected by the regulations.

Aoife Finnegan MLA commended the Department for the speed of its response to the Committee's request for engagement with businesses and would provide the Clerk with details of the meeting with TFS Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to return to consider the draft SR later in the meeting at Agenda Item 22.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department thanking it for its prompt response and to be provided with updates on any future planned engagement.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 4 November, regarding Animal Welfare Prosecutions 2025.

The Committee noted the Department will publish its annual report detailing the number of prosecutions in 2025 in the coming weeks but does not record or report offences under a category described as “organised animal cruelty”.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note and await the 2025 report.

The Committee agreed to go into closed session to commence Committee deliberations on the Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill.

The meeting went into closed session at 10:19am

6. Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill - Committee deliberations in closed session.

The Committee discussed Clauses 1 and 2 in the closed session. It was agreed that a summary of the discussions would be covered by the Clerk in the following Public Session.

The meeting resumed in public session at 10:36am

Áine Murphy MLA joined the meeting at 10:37am

7. Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill – Committee deliberations

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Clerk gave a summary, for the record, of the discussions during the closed session which covered both Clauses of the Bill, including key points received in evidence and potential amendments discussed at the last meeting. Areas of discussion included:

- Amending the timescale for the regulations coming into operation;
- The potential for a future inclusion of an environmental outcome;

- The removal of the index linked inflationary increase as it is not a feature of any other farm scheme and could impact on future budgets;
- The definition of areas of natural constraint (ANC) being the same as the former Severely Deprived Areas (SDA); and
- The possible future inclusion of flood plains as an ANC.

The Bill sponsor responded on the issues raised during the closed session from the Committee's evidence and stated that he was content to bring forward the following amendments:

- Clause 1 (2) - change the requirement for the timescale for the regulations to be made following royal assent from 12 months to 24 months.
- Clause 1 (3) (b) and (c) - remove the index linked inflationary rise and include a review.

The Chairperson thanked the Bill sponsor for his attendance and stated that the Committee will move on to the informal and then the formal clause by clause at the next meeting.

The Committee agreed to go into closed session to commence Committee deliberations on the Hunting with Dogs Bill

The meeting went into closed session at 10:42am

8. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Committee deliberations in closed session.

The Committee discussed Clauses 1 to 4 in the closed session. It was agreed that a summary of the discussions would be covered by the Clerk in the following Public Session.

The meeting resumed in public session at 11:32am

9. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Committee deliberations

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Chairperson advised that due to time constraints the Clerk will provide a summary of the closed session discussions at the next meeting.

The Bill sponsor responded on the issues raised during the closed session which included differences raised between trail hunting and drag hunting; and concerns raised by firearms certificate holders.

The Bill sponsor responded to a query regarding not declaring an interest following acceptance of an award from the League Against Cruel Sports and apologised for any confusion.

The Bill sponsor responded to a query raised relating to comments he made during an evidence session on 15 October regarding the use of dogs below ground, stating that the confusion arose as he had misspoken.

The Chairperson thanked the Bill sponsor for his attendance and stated that the Committee will return to continue deliberations at the next meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to police in other UK jurisdictions to request information on the evidential threshold when investigating trial hunting and drag hunting activities.

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11:40am

10. Oral Briefing from the Department External Review of Fivemiletown Cattle Cull - Departmental Evidence Session

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Brian Dooher – Chief Veterinary Officer
- Katrina Godfrey – Permanent Secretary

The Officials provided the Committee with an overview of the Independent review and the Departments response and Action Plan.

The Committee heard that the Department recognises the impact of the operation and that it accepts responsibility for the Department's shortcomings in the operational planning and actions on the day.

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

- Reasons for the absence of the Permanent Secretary and the CVO at the Committee meeting of 10 August to discuss the operation;
- Lack of records concerning the use of firearms and ammunitions at the operation;
- The timetable of the delivery of the first progress report;
- Concerns at the speed to move from compliance to enforcement and the impact on animal welfare;
- The independent oversight and scrutiny process into the progress of implementation of the recommendations;
- A request for the report author Dr Blake to meet with the Committee to provide a post report briefing;
- The cost of the review;
- The Department's response to previous deprivation orders;
- Actions to be taken by the Department to improve farm animal welfare
- Impact of the operation on the Department's reputation;
- Training of the Humane Slaughter Team and consideration of the use of technological solutions going forward;
- Concerns at the lack of contemporaneous notes and poor record keeping; and
- Disconnect between the Department and the farming community and a need for earlier intervention on animal welfare issues.

Committee discussions included comment that that there should always be a need to ensure that early intervention is taken in circumstances where there are concerns of a decline in animal welfare.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request details of previous deprivation orders acted upon and a breakdown of all instances of animal cull operation in the past ten years and to request that Dr Blake return to brief the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to return to the matter at the next meeting to agree any further actions.

The Departmental officials left the meeting at 1pm
The meeting was suspended at 1pm

The meeting resumed at 1.07pm
The Departmental officials joined the meeting at 1:07pm

Aoife Finnegan rejoined the meeting at 1:12pm
Gareth Wilson MLA rejoined the meeting at 1:11pm
John Blair MLA rejoined the meeting at 1:12pm

11. SL1 – The Hemp (Third Country Import) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 – Oral Briefing from the Department

This item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted the purpose of the draft SR, subject to the negative resolution procedure is to amend the Hemp (Third Country Imports) Regulations 2002 as they apply in Northern Ireland and update and raise the maximum acceptable Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) level of hemp and hemp seeds from third countries in line with updated EU rules, which are directly applicable here under the Windsor Framework.

The Committee noted on 8 October it agreed to receive an oral briefing from Officials and to issue a Call for Views, which received one response and a separate written email response was received from the office of Jim Allister MP.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Samantha Swann – Head of Poultrymeat, Eggs, Dairy, Wines and Spirits, and Hops and Hemp branch; and
- Kevin Comber – Poultrymeat, Eggs, Dairy, Wines and Spirits, and Hops and Hemp branch.

The Officials provided the Committee with an overview of the regulations.

A question and answer session followed, and topics of discussion included concerns the regulations will create, rather than prevent, divergence between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK.

The Committee were divided in support of the draft SR. A quorum was present and a vote was taken.

The Committee divided: **AYES 6 : NOES 3**.

Ayes: Diana Armstrong MLA , Declan McAleer MLA, John Blair MLA, Aoife Finnegan MLA, Aine Murphy MLA, Daniel McCrossan MLA

Noes: Tom Buchanan MLA, Michelle McIlveen MLA, Gareth Wilson MLA

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was content to support the draft SR subject to the ESR report.

The Departmental officials left the meeting at 1:16pm

The Departmental officials joined the meeting at 1:17pm

12. SL1 - The Welfare of Animals (Supply of Puppies and Kittens) Regulations - Oral Briefing from the Department

This item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted the draft SR, subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure will:

- prohibit the third-party sale and supply of puppies, and sale of kittens, by any person who has not bred the animal themselves;
- require that any sale or supply of such animals takes place at the premises where they were bred ; and
- introduce conditions relating to sales and advertising

The Committee noted on 15 October, it agreed to receive an oral briefing from Officials and to issue a Call for Views, which received two responses and eight separate email responses.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Christopher Andrews - Deputy Director Animal Health and Welfare Policy Division (AHWPD); and
- Catherine Goligher- Head of Animal Welfare & Dog Control Policy Branch;

The Committee heard the regulations are intended to strengthen protections for puppies and kittens in Northern Ireland to address welfare risks associated with third-party sale and supply, including poor welfare, illness, disease, and irresponsible breeding practices.

The Committee heard the regulations are tailored to reflect the unique circumstances in Northern Ireland and would bring parity with other jurisdictions.

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

- Concerns from councils regarding the financial burden being placed on them;
- If the system will interface with the systems in the Republic of Ireland to ensure consistency and prevent displacement;
- Concerns that registration requirements are not included in the regulations; and
- The rationale for proceeding with a phased approach and delaying the registration scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that, due to the fact that all questions where not taken due to time constraints, the Officials would return on 19 November to answer any further questions before the Committee decides if it is content to support the draft SR.

Aoife Finnegan MLA left the meeting at 1:33pm

The Departmental officials left the meeting at 1:34pm

The Committee agreed that due to time constraints it would consider agenda item 13 at the meeting on 19 November.

The Committee agreed to move to Agenda item 22 which was a late addition to the agenda

22. SL1 - The Digital Waste Tracking Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 4 November, regarding the Digital Waste Tracking Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

The Committee noted it was briefed by officials on 22 October and agreed it was not yet content to support the draft SR pending an update following further engagement with stakeholders, including businesses in border areas who will be affected by the regulations.

The Committee noted the SR, is subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure and made under powers in the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, to bring into operation the mandatory use of the Digital Waste Tracking (DWT) system to record waste data by any “legal entity” that is registered to receive waste in Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted the Call for Views received 3 responses of which included 2 Organisations: Antrim and Newtownabbey Council and arc21.

Agreed: Having considered the Departmental response at Matters Arising, the Committee agreed it was now content to support the draft SR subject to the ESR report in the Assembly debate.

The Committee agreed that due to time constraints it would consider Agenda Items 14, 15, 16 , 17 and 18 at the meeting on 17 November.

19. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

20. Any Other Business

Members discussed a further request for Dr Blake to brief the Committee on the Cattle Cull review report and agreed to invite him to a Committee meeting.

21. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 17 November at 10:00am in 30 Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 1:43pm

Signature: ……..

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated …….