



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

22 May 2025

Parliament Buildings, Room 21

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

Via Zoom: Áine Murphy MLA

Apologies: None

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 10.09am

1. Apologies

None

2. Declaration of Interests

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

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

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chair referred to the draft memo summarising the informal Q&A session held on 15 May with the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster and Members of the AERA and Economy Committees at the Balmoral Show.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the memo as drafted and for it to be shared with Economy Committee.

The Chair expressed his gratitude to the Royal Ulster Agricultural Society (RUAS) for the success of the Show and to all Assembly staff involved with the organisation and delivery in the Assembly Marquee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Assembly's Head of Engagement and to the RUAS to give its thanks and appreciation and to commend on the success of the Show.

The Chair referred to the consultation into John Blair's proposed Member's Bill seeking to ban hunting with dogs in Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted the consultation has now concluded and received over 12,000 responses with the majority of respondents agreeing that all hunting, searching, coursing, capturing, or killing wild mammals with dogs should be banned in Northern Ireland.

The Committee heard further details regarding the consultation and John Blair expressed thanks to the Assembly Bill Team and his staff for their assistance with the consultation and advised that the Committee will be kept informed of further progress.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the outcome of the consultation.

The Chair referred to correspondence from CRP DRS Solutions UK dated 9 May regarding a Returns Deposit Returns Scheme for Northern Ireland. They are assessing how their reverse vending machine solutions can help solve problems for retailers who may not have the necessary space and logistical capacity to participate fully in the deposit return scheme and requested a meeting with the Committee to discuss further.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a written briefing in the first instance from CRP DRS Solutions UK.

The Chair reminded the Committee of the planned concurrent meeting at 12pm on 28 May with the Economy Committee.

The Committee was reminded that it is a follow up to the concurrent meeting on 5 March when it considered the response of Fibrus Networks Ltd to Storm Éowyn. It was agreed that Members will hear from Officials from Department for the Economy and from DAERA on Project Stratum. The meeting will also consider Ofcom's clarification on the provision of telecommunications and mobile coverage in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee notified its intention to attend.

The Chair referred to the written statement from the Minister regarding the publication of the Animal Welfare Pathway 2025-27.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the statement.

4. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting on 15 May were agreed and signed by the Chair to be published.

Agreed: The Minutes were agreed.

5. Matters Arising

5.1 The Committee considered a response from the Mid Ulster District Council dated 13 May regarding Ongoing Odour Concerns at Cabragh.

The Committee noted the response states that the matter is currently subject to an ongoing investigation and assessment for “Statutory Nuisance” with respect to potential enforcement action under legislation.

The response also listed the actions the Council is undertaking, including undertaking odour monitoring at the residential sites on a weekly basis and engagement with the Public Health Agency and the NIEA on the issue.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

5.2 The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 20 May, regarding Sheep Scab in Northern Ireland, in response to its request for an update from the Department on how it is addressing the issue following its briefing from the Northern Ireland Sheep Scab Group on 08 May.

The Committee noted the response covered a number of matters:

- The DAERA website provides detail on the disease including clinical signs, advice and a range of practical support to industry on preventing spread;
- DAERA continues to raise awareness through social media and the Minister has asked officials to explore support to industry through a communications drive/awareness campaign, knowledge transfer programmes and other initiatives.

The Committee also noted the Department believes that the industry should take the Sheep Scab Group’s ‘Stamp Out Scab’ project findings to inform a new eradication strategy.

Agreed. The Committee agreed to write to the Department to enquire what actions they are considering to take to assist the Sheep Scab Group to take a new eradication strategy forward.

5.3 The Committee considered a response from the Minister, dated 20 May, regarding Warrenpoint Community Association (WCA) and what they claim to be significant breaches of waste management regulations at the Warrenpoint Harbour Authority.

The Committee noted the response stated that on 15 April, the latest inspection by NIEA officials, confirmed that Re-Gen Waste Limited continues to comply with the requirements of its waste licence and off-site odour assessments in January, February, March, and April 2025 detected no odours associated with the facility.

The Committee noted that due to the department receiving information of a threatening nature from a member of the public on 18 April, regulatory checks have been out on hold in the locality of Warrenpoint Harbour pending Police investigation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the response.

5.4 The Committee considered a response, dated 20 May, from the Department regarding Ongoing Odour Concerns at Cabragh in response to the Committee request for further information from the NIEA on the issue.

The Committee noted the response outlines how NIEA has responded to complaints raised including regular compliance inspections and odour assessments and that the latest inspection on 8 April 2025 confirmed that Sawgrass Substrates Limited is compliant with the conditions of its waste management licence.

The Committee noted that Compliance notices were issued by the NIEA in February 2021 and March 2023 concerning odour management and the operator engaged consultants to review the facility resulting in completed improvement works.

A Committee Member highlighted the concerns of local residents that are affected by the odours in the area and stated that

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note and to forward a copy of the response to the Cabragh Concerned Residents Association.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request information on the technical process used to measure and analyse odours and the parameters which are considered to be acceptable

5.5 The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 21 May, regarding funding for the Northern Ireland Shows Association (NISA).

The Committee noted the response states that the Minister met with representatives from NISA on 1 July 2024, where he made them aware of the financial pressures on DAERA and that financial support in the form of discretionary sponsorship is limited. However, from the NI Regional Food Programme (NIRFP), five shows were awarded funding.

The Committee also noted that DAERA has commenced work to co-design the development of a new rural policy and a full public consultation is due to take place within 2025/26. In relation to this DAERA is considering a strategic engagement event with stakeholders including NISA.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence and to forward a copy to NISA.

The Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society Ltd representatives joined the meeting at 10:10am

6. Oral briefing from Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society Ltd

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Kathleen McBride, CEO;
- Dee McElroy, Company Director; and
- Pat Close, Management Committee Representative.

The Committee heard of the work undertaken by the Co-operative and the current challenges it faces.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard that the Eel Management Plan (EMP) introduced in 2009 is now outdated given ecological changes in Lough Neagh and they are calling for meaningful engagement with DAERA to update it as a matter of urgency.

The Committee heard that that the Co-operative was not consulted on the Lough Neagh Plan and is not included in any funding support and that the industry is in danger of collapse if action is not taken to clean up the Lough.

Some Members of the Committee expressed concern that the Co-operative were not consulted regarding the Lough Neagh Plan.

The Committee heard that the once high quality, high fat content European Eels in the Lough has deteriorated due combination of factors including the issue of zebra mussels, poor water quality and the collapse of the fly population which is a vital source of food for eels. This has led to the suspension of commercial eel fishing which could lead to the loss of important markets.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society Ltd representatives left the meeting at 11:44am

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11:44am

7. Departmental oral evidence session in relation to the Update on Farm Sustainability Standards and Penalty Matrix

The following DAERA Officials briefed the Committee:

- Anna Campbell, Director of Agricultural and Environmental Schemes Division;
- Aidan McEvoy, Head of Controls & Assurance Development Branch;
- Dr Elvira McAleese, Divisional Veterinary Officer;
- Mark Hammond, NIEA; and
- Gareth Greer, Principal Scientific Officer, NIEA.

The Committee were given an update on the development of the Farm Sustainability Standards and Revised Penalty Matrix.

The Committee heard the Standards have been developed as part of the Sustainable Agriculture Programme to promote good farm management practices, responsible stewardship and complement the regulations that protect the environment, animal and human health, and animal welfare. The new Matrix is to be introduced alongside the Farm Sustainability Standards in January 2026.

The Committee heard that the aim is to make the system simpler, fairer, more consistent in approach and responsive to changes that may arise. The Committee also heard the aim is to change behaviours rather than the application of penalties.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard that concerns raised by the Agri-Policy Stakeholder Group (APSG) have been addressed but there is still an opportunity to raise further concerns should they arise.

A Committee Member expressed concern at the level of penalties for low severity minor breaches.

A Member queried why the Department will be laying the Statutory Rule via the negative resolution process rather than by affirmative resolution. The officials stated that they would provide a written response to that query in due course.

The Chair thanked Officials for their attendance.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 12.22pm

The meeting was suspended at 12.22pm

The meeting resumed at 12:34pm

8. Agriculture Bill - Agreement of Draft Report / Recommendations

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Chair informed Members that they would consider the draft report on the Bill.

The Chair informed Members that they would review the report sequentially and Members could raise any pertinent issues.

The Chair then sought Members agreement of each section of the Report

Powers and Membership

The Committee was content with this section as drafted.

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms used in this Report

The Committee was content with this section as drafted.

Executive Summary – Paragraphs 1 to 20

The Committee was content with this section as drafted.

Introduction – Paragraphs 21 – 56

The Committee was content with this section as drafted, pending removal of the first line of paragraph 30.

Context and Overview of the Bill – Paragraphs 57 – 96

The Committee was content with this section as drafted pending the correction of typos at paragraphs 80 and 95.

Committee Recommendations – Paragraphs 97 – 106

The Committee was content with this section as drafted pending the replacement of “The Chair” with “Some Members” at paragraph 106.

Consideration of the Bill – Paragraphs 107 – 128

The Committee was content with this section as drafted pending the replacement of “Ireland” with “The Republic of Ireland”.

Committee Deliberations on the Bill – Paragraphs 129 – 192

The Introduction to the Section Paragraphs 129 - 132

The Committee was content with this section as drafted.

Delegated Powers – Paragraphs 133 - 136

The Committee was content with this section as drafted.

Clause 1 – Aid in the fruit and vegetables sector: amendment of CMO Regulation – Paragraphs 137 – 160

The Committee was content with this section as drafted pending the correction of a grammatical error.

Clause 2 – Aid in the fruit and vegetables sector: power to modify – Paragraphs 161 – 170

The Committee was content with this section as drafted.

Clause 3 – Information provision and promotion measures: power to modify - Paragraphs 171 – 176

The Committee was content with this section as drafted.

Clause 4 – Regulations – Paragraphs 177 - 183

The Committee was content with this section as drafted.

Clause 5 – Interpretation – Paragraphs 184 - 191

The Committee was content with this section as drafted.

Clause 6 Commencement and Short Title - Paragraphs 192 - 195

The Committee was content with this section as drafted.

Formal Clause by Clause Scrutiny of the Bill Paragraphs 196 - 204

The Committee was content with this section as drafted.

This completed the Committee Stage of the Bill and the Committee agreed that the report be laid in the business office on 23rd May 2025 and published on its website as soon as possible.

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 1pm

9. SL1 The Scallop Enhancement Sites (Prohibited Methods of Fishing) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Fiona Taylor, Head of Sea Fisheries Policy and Grants Branch; and
- Patrick Smith, Sea Fisheries Policy Branch.

The Committee heard that the Department intends to make a Statutory Rule 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 reseeded sites.

The Committee discussed the future proofing elements of the SR and heard that the SR will be laid before the Assembly under the negative resolution procedure and be subject to Executive approval.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Department proceeds to make the SR and we will then consider it and the ESR Report in due course.

The Chair thanked the Officials for the briefing.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 1:06pm

10. SR 2025/81 The Quality of Bathing Water (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted it was briefed on the SL1 at its meeting of 13 March when it heard the Department intends to make this SR to amend Schedule 1 of The Quality of Bathing Water (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008, as amended 2018, to increase the number of bathing waters identified from 26 to 33.

The Committee noted on 13 March it agreed that the Department proceeds to make the SR to be laid before the Assembly under the negative resolution procedure and subject to Executive approval.

The Committee was advised there have been no changes since it received the briefing on the SL1.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it has considered SR 2025/81 The Quality of Bathing Water (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and has no objection to the Rule, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

11 - Departmental Written Briefing - Publication of Animal Welfare Pathway 2025-27

The Committee considered the Animal Welfare Pathway document - Advancing Animal Welfare in Northern Ireland 2025-27.

The Committee noted it sets out the reforms which the Department aims to deliver by the end of the Assembly mandate in May 2027, in line with key pledge six in the DAERA Corporate Plan 2025-27.

The Committee noted the list of ten proposed reforms which will be subject to further policy development and public consultation.

The Committee noted it had already been briefed on the CCTV matter, it will receive updates on each reform in due course and that it will receive a Departmental briefing on the proposals to prohibit third party pet sales at the meeting of 29 May.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the briefing.

12. Correspondence.

The Committee considered a correspondence memo.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the memo

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Infrastructure regarding the disaggregation of the £425 million in relation to PfG priorities and that £5m is allocated to Lough Neagh and £12.3m to Just Transition.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the memo.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 16 May, from Pivotal regarding its report titled - Achieving greater integration in Northern Ireland: Young People's Voices.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence and to add Pivotal to its list of potential informal meetings.

The Committee considered the 39th Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

The Committee noted The Report refers to the Draft SR: The Farming with Nature Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025, which is not required to be drawn to the special attention of the Assembly

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the Report.

The Committee considered correspondence it has been copied into, dated 7 May, in reply from Lord Carlile, Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee to Nick Thomas-Symonds MP Minister for the Cabinet Office, regarding veterinary medicines and the Windsor Framework.

The copied correspondence indicated that the UK Government has no assessment of the number of products at risk of discontinuation or where businesses are yet to make a decision regarding the continued supply of veterinary medicines products in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered further correspondence it had been copied into from the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee seeking further updates in the following matters within the scope of the Windsor Framework.

- 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.
- 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.
- 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 authorised and prescribed for oral administration via routes other than medicated feed and administered by the animal keeper to food producing animals.
- 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 guaranteed and optional quality terms for agricultural products.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence from Farmers for Action (FFA) requesting a formal meeting with the Committee to discuss the NAP proposals.

Agreed: the Committee agreed to seek a written paper in the first instance requesting that the FFA outline their concerns.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department of Business and Trade regarding the Consultation into the Groceries Code Adjudicator (GCA) statutory review, which runs from 13 May to 5 August, seeking views and evidence which will allow the Secretary of State to assess the GCA's performance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Infrastructure dated 14 May in relation to a briefing it received from the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) on the topic of land agents acting on behalf of landowners subject to a vesting order.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the memo and the briefing paper.

The Committee noted it has provisionally planned for a concurrent meeting with the Committee for Infrastructure on Tuesday 3rd June regarding an update on issues on A5 farmland and replacement farm buildings issues.

The Committee noted it will hear evidence from the UFU and DAERA Officials. The Committee also wished to hear from farmers and potentially land agents directly affected by the development.

13. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

The Committee considered a list of potential stakeholders impacted by the NAP to consider inviting to brief the Committee.

Agreed: the Committee agreed to return to the matter at an informal planning session next week once it has the opportunity to consider the list.

14. Any Other Business

None.

15. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on Thursday 29th May at 10.00am **in Parliament Buildings, Room 21**

John Blair MLA left the meeting at 12:53pm

Patsy McGlone MLA left the meeting at 1:06pm

The Chair sought the Committees consent to move into closed session to consider restricted legal advice from Legal Services as part of its due diligence on fair farm prices and the proposed Farm Welfare Bill.

The Chair stated that the meeting will adjourn after that session without returning to public session.

The Meeting went into closed session at 1:15pm

The meeting was adjourned at 1:34pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated