



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

26 March 2026

**Meeting location: Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co Operative Society Visitors
Centre, Toomebridge**

Present: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Michelle McIlveen 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 10:22am

The Chairperson stated that as there was a quorum of four the Committee could take evidence but not take any decisions.

1. Apologies

Tom Buchanan MLA

Aoife Finnegan MLA

Áine Murphy MLA

Gareth Wilson MLA

2. Declaration of Interests

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

None were declared.

The Committee had a quorum of four Members and moved to Agenda item 6 to take evidence.

The Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association, (NIMEA); ABP Food Group & Dunbia representatives joined the meeting at 10:24am

6. Oral evidence session from The Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association, (NIMEA); ABP Food Group & Dunbia on the SL1 - The Sheep Carcase Classification and Price Reporting and Other Issues Impacting the Sector.

The Committee noted on 26 February it was briefed by Officials and heard that the Department intends to make the SR under the affirmative procedure to introduce mandatory sheep carcase classification and price reporting in Northern Ireland.

The Committee also noted it considered correspondence from NIMEA outlining its concerns regarding unintended consequences of the SR and agreed to hear from NIMEA and other producers in the sector before making its decision whether or not to support the SR in the debate in the Assembly.

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr Daryl McLaughlin, Chief Executive, NI Meat Exporters Association;
- Mr George Mullan, Managing Director, ABP Food Group; and
- Mr Neil Swann, Site Manager NI, Dunbia

The Committee heard that it was believed that the current voluntary system was working well and saw no need to change it and do not understand the rationale for the introduction of a mandatory scheme.

The Committee heard that instead of creating a single standard process throughout the UK this move would create a divergence from the rest of the UK as the new system will not align with GB specifications.

The Committee heard that the proposals will slow down the process; disrupt supply and create hygiene issues.

There then followed a question and answer session:

The Committee heard that NI producers will be at a competitive disadvantage with the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland as buyers will not wish to purchase parts that will be discarded.

The Committee heard that other concerns included:

- Higher risk of contamination;
- Costs involved in reskilling staff
- Increased costs to local industry of between £1 to £2 per head.

The Committee also heard of wider issues and concerns currently facing the industry including:

- Future agricultural support;
- Support for the sheep sector;
- Planning delays and its impact on environmental improvements;
- The impact of Bovine TB;
- Support for the Farming with Nature Schemes
- Rising business costs; and
- Food security concerns

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The NIMEA; ABP Food Group & Dunbia representatives left the meeting at 11:17am

The Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society Ltd representatives joined the meeting at 11:19am

7. Oral evidence session from Lough Neagh Fishermen's Co-operative Society Ltd

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr Jerry McNally Chairperson;
- Ms Kathleen McBride, CEO;
- Mr Dee McElroy, Director; and
- Mr Frankie Conlon, Director

The Committee heard details of the challenges facing the industry, including water quality issues in Lough Neagh.

The Committee also heard that the Eel Management Programme (EMP) was considered to be out of date and not fit for purpose.

The Committee also heard details of the Eel support scheme provided by the Minister and noted the Co-operatives concerns at that the level of support offered based on data taken from 2024 which was the lowest catch on record.

The Committee also heard concerns at the lack of support for the Co-operative Society and eel fishermen compared to the agricultural sector.

A question and answer session followed.

The Committee heard of other areas of concerns including:

- Frustration at the low level of test samples taken by DAERA last year;
- Issues of marketing of eels due to poor water quality in the Lough;
- Lack of timely and meaningful engagement with DAERA;

- The lack of supply of glass eels from France to restock the Lough and the inability to purchase available glass eel stocks from UK suppliers, due to legislative restrictions;
- The increasingly negative impact of blue green algae on perch and roach leading to fishermen leaving the industry due to low stocks.

The Chairperson thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The representatives left the meeting at 12:15pm

There was a quorum of four Members and the Committee could not consider agenda items 3, 4, 5, 8, 9 and 10 as they required a decision to be taken or question put.

11. Any Other Business

There was no other business

12. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 16 April 2026 at Room 21 Parliament Buildings at 10:00am.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:17pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated