



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

18 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
Áine Murphy MLA
Gareth Wilson MLA

Via Zoom: 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 10:11am

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 in Agenda Item 7 as he visited the AFBI Hillsborough site on 17 June 2026 in his capacity as an MLA.

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

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

Tom Buchanan MLA joined the meeting at 10:13am

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to a note providing a summary of the Anaerobic Digestion event at the Stormont Hotel on 4 June.

Agreed: The Committee was content with the note as drafted and that it is published on the Committee website and shared with the event attendees.

The Chairperson referred to his response of 10 June to concerns raised in correspondence, dated 9 June, by two school age students regarding raw sewage discharge into the River Lagan from the Newtownbreda Wastewater Treatment Works on 4 April 2026, and other discharges being made at the same location on other dates.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to the Ulster Farmers Union (UFU) press release, and a letter dated 10 June from the UFU to Minister Muir on the need for urgent clarity from Sofina Foods on the future of some Northern Ireland pig producers.

The Chairperson then referred to a note of the informal meeting it held with the UFU on 15 June to discuss the economic impact and animal welfare implications for Northern Ireland pig producers affected by ongoing uncertainty around supply contracts for Sofina Foods.

The Chairperson also referred to the timeline provided by the UFU of events and communications with Sofina on the matter with an outline of the UFU 'Asks' and Key Concerns.

The Committee noted the UFU requests that Sofina:

- Provide written confirmation of the number of farm businesses affected and pigs involved;
- Clarify notice dates, contractual arrangements and final supply dates;
- Explain the criteria used to select groups/producers for termination of contracts; and
- Clarify the future role of independent NI family farms in its supply chain.

The Committee also noted the UFU has requested that the Department:

- Urgently assess the animal welfare risks if pigs are left without an outlet; and
- Assess the economic and structural impact on the NI pig sector.

The Committee noted the UFU advised Members that they were scheduled to meet the Minister to discuss the matter on Tuesday 16 June.

Members recognised that there are commercial sensitivities to be considered but that there are imminent animal welfare issues and a threat to the pig sector in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee were content with the note of the meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed in the first instance to write to Sofina and outline the concerns expressed by the UFU and to enquire what the wider ambitions and strategy of Sofina are going forward regarding NI pig production.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Minister regarding an urgent SL1 concerning third-party public liability insurance for prohibited breeds and to a Clerk's Memo covering the background and also issues raised at an informal meeting between the Chair, The Deputy Chair and the Minister on the matter on 15 June.

The Committee noted that on 19 March it considered correspondence from Dogs Trust, regarding its decision to remove the third-party public liability insurance benefit from its Companion Club from 1 July and the impact on owners of exempted dogs - as this is currently the only way for them to comply with the Dangerous Dogs Order.

The Committee noted at that time the Department advised that securing an alternative provider was unlikely. The Minister now advises that new legislation is required to remove the insurance requirement for prohibited breeds from current law, consistent with the approach now being taken in all other UK jurisdictions and the Minister requests Committee agreement to an expedited scrutiny process.

The Committee noted that The Examiner of Statutory Rules will need to see the content of the SR, consider its impacts, and consider the explanation of the Department regarding the breach of the 21-day rule, before coming to a view.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to return to the matter later in the meeting at Agenda Item 14.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 11 June 2026.

5. Matters Arising

There were no Matters Arising.

The Ulster Farmers Union, Sheep Taskforce and NI Sheep Association representatives joined the meeting at 10:20am

Daniel McCrossan MLA joined the meeting via zoom at 10:29am

Áine Murphy MLA joined the meeting at 10:29am

6. Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill - Briefing from Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU), Sheep Taskforce and NI Sheep Association (NSA)

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr John McClenaghan, President, UFU;
- Mr Clement Lynch, Deputy President, UFU;
- Ms Ellen Moorehead, NI Regional Coordinator, NSA;
- Mr Edward Adamson, Secretary, NSA; and
- Kellie McEvoy, Beef, Lamb and Hill Policy Officer, UFU;

The Committee heard that the UFU and the NSA supports the Bill in principle but if funding is not provided through additional Executive resources or a reallocation of DAERA funding from outside the direct farm support budget their support would be withdrawn.

The Committee also heard that sheep farming, which in many cases is the only suitable option in ANC areas, brings environmental benefits including increasing biodiversity, carbon sequestration, and a reduction in wildfire risk.

The Committee heard of the lack of additional support for sheep industry and an 11% reduction of sheep in NI compared to 4% in rest of UK where support is provided.

The Committee heard that NI sheep farmers have lost 17% of their direct support with no option of regaining this funding.

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

- How payments could help to preserve communities in ANC areas where it is currently not viable for young people to remain in farming;
- Support schemes in other parts of the UK and if a lack of support has created a competitive disadvantage in Northern Ireland;
- The underfunding of the sheep industry relative to other farming sectors;
- The wider impact of such ANC payments on the agri food industry going forward;

- The potential environmental cost of not providing ANC payments;
- Concerns regarding funding issues; and
- If a specific financial support scheme for sheep farmers would be more beneficial rather than an ANC payment scheme.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The Ulster Farmers Union, Sheep Taskforce and NI Sheep Association representatives left the meeting at 11:11am

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11:11am

7. Oral Briefing from AFBI and DAERA Officials on AFBI Governance Issues

The Committee noted that on 29 January it received an oral briefing from AFBI Officials in relation to the March 2024 data breach and the investigation into allegations of poor animal welfare at AFBI.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Mr Mark O'Donnell, DAERA, Head of Strategic Planning and Corporate Services Group;
- Mr Brian Dooher, Chief Veterinary Officer, DAERA;
- Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer, AFBI; and
- Prof. Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable AgriFood Sciences Division, AFBI.

The Committee were given an update on the AFBI review of governance issues and plans for improvement in relation to laboratory biosafety compliance; the AFBI data breach; and operational practices at the Hillsborough farm, following the Minister's oral statement to the Assembly on 14 April 2026

The Committee heard that AFBI welcomes DAERA's response to its review and looks forward to working with DAERA in partnership to strengthen AFBI's role.

The Committee also heard that it is intended that the enhanced oversight introduced to oversee the action plan is a short term measure and there will be a move back to more usual oversight arrangements.

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

- The possible impact on work undertaken by AFBI due to the absence of SAPO Containment Level 4 laboratory facilities;
- The challenges that capital budget restraints and current infrastructure present to AFBI's capacity to provide services;
- Opportunities that a mixed income model offers to increasing income generation;
- Recognition that work is required in terms of stakeholder engagement; and
- Efforts to rebuild public and farmers' confidence and the impact on consumer confidence in the NI agriculture sector.

In response to a query regarding DAERA's stewardship and partnership with AFBI the Committee heard that there is a view that structural change is not required and that AFBI should remain an Arms Length Body.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11:49am

The meeting was suspended at 11:49am

The meeting resumed at 12:14pm

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 12:14pm

8. SL1 - The Agriculture (Student Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee noted on 21 May it agreed to note receipt of the SL1, issue a Call for Views, which then received no responses, and to receive an oral briefing from Officials.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Mark McLean, Acting Chief Agricultural Economist; and

- Sharon Muldoon, Head of Education Policy Branch.

The Committee noted the purpose of the SR, which is subject to negative resolution procedure, is to amend The Agriculture (Student Fees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 by applying an inflationary increase to the current Higher Education student fees at CAFRE and sets the 2026/27 academic year as the final year that the 2022 legacy fee framework will operate. It also, for student fee purposes, better defines, with new wording, international students.

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

- Other financial assistance offered to students including a Hardship fund, and a Higher education bursary for care leavers;
- Concerns on possible effect of the increase in fees on enrolment; and
- Additional income generated from the increase in fees.

The Chair asked Officials to provide the Committee with more detail on DAERA's Young Peoples Champion.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it has no objection to the Rule subject to the ESR report.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 12:23pm

The Chair returned to Agenda item 6 - Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek responses from the Bill Team to the questions and issues raised in the ANC Bill (Review of Costs), research paper, presented to the Committee on 4 June.

The Committee agreed to move to Agenda Item 14, noting that it was a late addition to the Agenda as the Committee Team received the SL1 and draft SR after the main Pack was issued.

14. SL1 - The Dangerous Dogs (Compensation and Exemption Schemes) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee noted it discussed the background to the SL1 at Chair's Business earlier in the meeting and that as the Committee only received the SL1 letter on 17 June it would require further time to consider it.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue a Call for Views before the end of the week.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to return to consider the SL1 at its next meeting.

9. Departmental Written Briefing – Update on Proposed Plans to Launch a Farming with Nature (FwN) Higher Scheme in June 2026

The Committee noted The Farming with Nature Package will be delivered in three strands over the next five years with the launch of The FwN Transition Scheme in 2025, the launch of FwN Landscape Projects in Autumn 2026; followed by the FwN Priority Habitats which is currently under development.

The Committee noted the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) had two levels (Higher and Wider) with agreements lasting 5 years and that Tranche 4 agreements ended on 31 December 2025 with the final tranche 8 due to end in December 2029.

The Committee noted that before a replacement scheme for EFS Higher is developed the FwN Higher Scheme is proposed as an interim scheme to facilitate the migration of eligible EFS Higher agreement holders into FwN Higher as their existing agreements expire - pending the development and launch of the new Priority Habitats Scheme.

The Committee noted the Scheme will open for applications in June 2026 and the estimated total cost from 2026/27 to 2030/31 inclusive is £28.7m. Principal changes from EFS Higher include:

- The introduction of Annual agreements;
- Retention of area based Remedial Management Options only;

- Exclusion of Non-Productive Items; and
- Use of the FwN IT system.

This initial agreement period will run to 31 December 2026 and will be on an annual basis after that.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the briefing.

10. Correspondence

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

Correspondence dated 12 June from the Department regarding the Assembly Debate of the Draft Mandatory Use of Closed Circuit Television in Slaughterhouses Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026, which is anticipated will be on 29 June.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence dated 12 June from the Department regarding the Ministers Approval of Round 4 Belfast City Airport Noise Action Plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A copy of the OEP Framework Document dated May 2026, which sets out the broad governance framework within which the OEP and Defra, in partnership with DAERA, operate.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence dated 9 June, from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy seeking views on the Utility Regulator (Support for Decarbonisation Preparation) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue a NIL response.

Correspondence dated 11 June, from Farmers For Action requesting to meet informally with the Committee to discuss the potential for the Northern Ireland Farm Welfare Bill being taken forward as an Emergency Bill and to discuss the Lough Neagh issues.

The Committee noted it previously provided FFA with correspondence detailing the Committee's scrutiny and its position on the proposal for a Farm Welfare Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to return to the matter at the next meeting to consider a response.

Correspondence dated 15 June, from an individual regarding animal welfare concerns relating to Halal and Kosher Meat.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department for comment.

11. 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 it agreed to an additional meeting to be held on 23 June to take evidence from Shared Environmental Services (SES), NI Poultry Federation (to represent the egg producers) and the UFU on the issues around poultry litter in light of DAFM temporary ban on the export to the Republic of Ireland.

The Committee noted that correspondence has been received from the Minister dated 18 June advising that the DAFMs temporary ban on the export of litter has been lifted.

The Committee noted that SES have notified it is not able to attend the meeting on 23 June as there has been insufficient time to prepare a briefing and requesting an alternative date for attendance.

Members discussed seeking clarification of the process, if needed, required to summon witnesses to give evidence to the Committee.

The Committee also noted SES advises it is due to meet Minister Muir, along with industry representatives, on 17 June 2026 to discuss related matters.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to contact those invited to attend the meeting on 23 June advising them of the lifting of the temporary ban and seeking confirmation if they still wished to attend or to defer the matter to a later date.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Minister asking for an update on meeting with SES on 17 June.

12. Any Other Business

None

13. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 25 June at 10:00am at the Portaferry Hotel.

The meeting was adjourned 12:41pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated