



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

## Draft Minutes of Proceedings

**Thursday 14 March 2024**

**Room 21, Parliament Buildings**

**Present:** Tom Elliott MLA (Chairperson)  
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
John Blair MLA  
Nicola Brogan MLA  
Tom Buchanan MLA  
William Irwin MLA  
Patsy McGlone MLA  
Ms Michelle McIlveen MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

None

**Apologies:** Áine Murphy MLA

**In Attendance:** Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk

Ms Gillian Barker, Assistant Assembly Clerk

Mr Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor

Mr Damien Brown, Clerical Officer

*The Chair welcomed new committee team member, Mr Damien Brown.*

*The Chair reminded members of the 'Declaration of Interests' and asked Members if there are any new interests to declare, relevant to the items under consideration at this meeting, that had not already been declared at the first meeting. None were declared.*

***The meeting opened in public session at 10.03 am***

## **1. Apologies**

Áine Murphy MLA

***Mr Patsy McGlone MLA left the meeting at 10.05 am***

***The meeting was suspended at 10.07 am due to lack of a quorum.***

***Mr Patsy McGlone MLA re-joined the meeting at 10.08 am.***

***The meeting reconvened in public session at 10.08 am as a quorum was present.***

## **2. Minutes**

Minutes of 7 March 2024 were agreed with the following amendment:

- Mr Patsy McGlone MLA and Ms Michelle McIlveen MLA were both in attendance on 7 March 2024.

***Mr William Irwin MLA joined the meeting at 10.10 am***

***Mr Tom Buchanan MLA joined the meeting at 10.10 am***

### **3. Chairperson's Business**

The Committee noted next week's meeting pack will go out on Tuesday 19 March 2024 due to the bank holiday on Monday 18 March 2024.

***The meeting remained in Public Session at 10.11 am***

***Mr John Blair MLA joined the meeting at 10.13 am***

### **4. Matters Arising**

The Chairperson advised the Committee that it had received a response from the Department, dated 12 March 2024, regarding reinstatement of small fishing grants in Northern Ireland and the forthcoming five-year strategy plan for the support of the marine and fisheries sectors.

The Committee was content to note.

The Chairperson advised the Committee that it had received a response from the Department, dated 12 March 2024, regarding information requested on the membership of the 'Paws for Thought' Group, that no animal welfare groups are presently included in the membership as these groups have no statutory enforcement powers; and information on the remit for the Group in terms of tackling illegal puppy breeding and sales.

The Committee was content to note.

The Chairperson advised the Committee that it had received a response from the Department, dated 12 March 2024, regarding the budget for Tackling Rural Poverty and Social Isolation [TRPSI] and the development of a TRPSI Action Plan for 2024/2025 being underway.

The Committee was content to note.

The Chairperson advised the Committee that it had received a response from the Department, dated 13 March 2024, regarding the breakdown of costs regarding NI Protocol, Windsor Framework and Points of Entry 2023-24 budget allocation.

**Agreed:** The Committee particularly noted staff costs of £18.6m are the greatest expense and agreed that they may need to return to this matter.

The Chairperson advised the Committee that it had received a response from the Department, dated 13 March 2024, regarding agricultural planning applications being dealt with by the Northern Ireland Environment Agency and the current case load of 94 agricultural planning consultations.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to explore this further with the NIEA Officials later in the meeting.

The Chairperson advised the Committee that it had received a response from the Minister, dated 12 March 2024, regarding the matters raised by Mr Macdonald KC on Victoria Square Residential Tower in Belfast; and correspondence from Mr Macdonald dated 13 March 2024. The Minister stated that the 'Defective Premises (Northern Ireland) Order 1975 which currently sits with DAERA, ought to sit with Department for Communities. The Minister has since made representation to the Communities Minister on behalf of Mr Macdonald KC.

**Agreed:** The Committee was content to note that due to the complexities of this matter, the relevant Clerks have met to ensure a co-ordinated process, however, agreed to write to Assembly Legal Services to request further advice and to copy in the Minister on this letter.

The Chairperson advised the Committee that it had received a response from the Minister, dated 12 March 2024, regarding the Ammonia Strategy and how many farmers have taken up the 'low emissions equipment' available to date.

The Committee was content to note.

***The meeting went into Private Session at 10.23 am***

**5. Research and Information Service (RaISe) Briefing – Public Finance Scrutiny Unit (PFSU).**

The Chair welcomed the RaISe Officials from the PFSU to the meeting and invited them to brief the Committee.

- Mrs Eileen Regan, Senior Research Officer; and
- Ms Rachel Keyes, Research Officer.

The Committee noted the presentation will be available on the Members' Portal on AssISt and a copy to be sent to Committee Members in due course.

The Committee noted the PFSU will also be offering workshops to be delivered through Political Parties or on an individual basis.

The Chair thanked the RaISe Officials for their comprehensive briefing.

***Mr Patsy McGlone MLA left the meeting at 11.05 am***

***Mr Patsy McGlone MLA re-joined the meeting at 11.12 am***

***The RaISe Officials, Ms Eileen Regan and Ms Rachel Keys left the meeting at 11.13 am.***

***The meeting was suspended at 11.13 am.***

***The meeting reconvened in Public Session at 11.17 am,***

**6. Departmental Briefing – Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA)**

The Chair welcomed the NIEA Officials to the meeting and invited them to brief the Committee:

- Mr David Reid, Chief Executive, NIEA
- Dr Richard Crowe, Director of Resource Efficiency Division, NIEA;
- Dr Sara McGuckin, Head of Natural Science, NIEA;
- Mr Mark Hammond, Head of Natural Environment Operations, NIEA.

The Committee noted the following papers for the briefing:

- DAERA First Day Brief; and
- DAERA Key Challenges.

The NIEA Officials briefed the Committee, followed by a question and answer session and offered to return to the Committee to give a further briefing on agricultural planning consultation cases.

The Chair thanked the Officials for attending the meeting.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department for further information regarding the agricultural planning consultations.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the Officials offered to return to the Committee to give a more detailed briefing on agricultural planning cases.

***Mr John Blair MLA left the meeting at 12.18 pm***

***The Departmental Officials re Northern Ireland Environment Agency left the meeting at 12.26 pm.***

***Mr Tom Buchanan MLA left the meeting at 12.26 pm***

***Mr Patsy McGlone MLA left the meeting at 12.26 pm***

***Mr Declan McAleer MLA left the meeting at 12.25 pm***

***Mr Patsy McGlone MLA re-joined the meeting at 12.31 pm***

***Mr Declan McAleer MLA re-joined the meeting at 12.33 pm***

## **7. Departmental Briefing – Forest Service**

The Chair welcomed the Forest Service Officials to the meeting and invited them to brief the Committee.

- Mr John Joe O'Boyle, Chief Executive Forest Service; and
- Mr Michael Fairgrieve, Head of Forest Policy, Regulation and Development.

The Committee noted the following papers for the briefing;

- DAERA First Day Brief; and
- DAERA Key Challenges.

The Officials briefed the Committee followed by a question and answer session.

The Chair thanked the Officials for attending the meeting and noted that the Officials offered to return to the Committee to give a more detailed briefing on restoring Peatlands and Bog lands.

***The Departmental Officials re Forest Service left the meeting at 13.17 pm.***

## **8. Correspondence**

**The Committee addressed the following items of correspondence:**

8.1 The Chairperson informed the Committee that it had received correspondence, dated 4 March 2024, from Rebecca Pow MP to the Chair of the EU Affairs Sub Committee on the Windsor Framework regarding a proposal for a Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on Fluorinated Greenhouse Gases, Amending Directive (EU) 2019/1937 and Repealing Regulation.

The Committee was content to note.

8.2 The Chairperson informed the Committee that it had received correspondence, dated 4 March 2024, from The NI Fiscal Council including a link to its latest report 'Updated estimate of the relative need for public spending in NI: further sensitivity analysis'.

The Committee was content to note.

8.3 The Chairperson informed the Committee that it had received correspondence from Mr Andrew Agnew, Algae Weed Control Ltd regarding the management of blue/green algae in Lough Neagh.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the correspondence and agreed to forward to the Department for information.

8.4 The Chairperson informed the Committee that it had received correspondence, dated 4 March 2024 from the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) regarding an introduction to their role and remit. The CMA have requested to brief the Committee. The Committee also noted an email dated 12 March 2024, from Louise Close of CMA, updating the Committee on a paper published regarding the provision of veterinary services for household pets in the UK.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the correspondence and agreed to add a briefing to the Committee Forward Work Programme.

8.5 The Chairperson informed the Committee that it had received correspondence, dated 5 March 2024, from the Department regarding the launch of a 12-week consultation starting on 7 March 2024 'Rethinking Our Resources: Measures for climate Action and a Circular Economy in NI'.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the consultation and agreed to ask the Department for a briefing on this matter prior to the consultation closing.

8.6 The Chairperson informed the Committee that it had received correspondence, dated 5 March 2024, from The North of Ireland Veterinary Association (NIVA) and a request for an informal meeting.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted and added NIVA to the Committee Forward Work Programme for an informal meeting.

8.7 The Chairperson informed the Committee that it had received correspondence, dated 8 March 2024, from NI Assembly EU Affairs Manager,



Shauna Mageean, regarding clarity on copied correspondence to the Committee from the House of Lords EU Affairs Sub Committee on the Windsor Framework.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the correspondence and agreed to consider correspondence from that Sub Committee on a case by case basis. Chair requested that Members bring any concerns regarding the content of such correspondence to the fore at the Committee meetings, so the Committee can consider seeking further information from the Department or affected stakeholders as required.

The Committee then considered four such copied letters from the House of Lords EU Affairs Sub Committee on the Windsor Framework.

8.8 The Chairperson informed the Committee that it had received copied correspondence, dated 7 March 2024, from Lord Jay of Ewelme, Chair of the EU Affairs Sub Committee on the Windsor Framework to Mark Spencer MP (Minister of State for Food, Farming and Fisheries) regarding the impact of certain EU Regulations on Northern Ireland, namely 'Fruit juices and certain similar products intended for human consumption'.

The Committee was content to note.

8.9 The Chairperson informed the Committee that it had received copied correspondence, dated 7 March 2024, from Lord Jay of Ewelme, Chair of the EU Affairs Sub Committee on the Windsor Framework to Mark Spencer MP (Minister of State for Food, Farming and Fisheries), regarding the impact of certain EU Regulations on Northern Ireland, namely marketing standards of eggs.

The Committee was content to note.

8.10 The Chairperson informed the Committee that it had received copied correspondence, dated 7 March 2024, from Lord Jay of Ewelme, Chair of the EU Affairs Sub Committee on the Windsor Framework to Mark Spencer MP

(Minister of State for Food, Farming and Fisheries), regarding the impact of certain EU Regulations on Northern Ireland, namely marketing standards for the Fruit and Vegetable Sector.

The Committee was content to note.

8.11 The Chairperson informed the Committee that it had received copied correspondence, dated 7 March 2024, from Lord Jay of Ewelme, Chair of the EU Affairs Sub Committee on the Windsor Framework to Lord Douglas Miller, that he has written to Minister of State for Biosecurity, Animal Health & Welfare Food, regarding the impact of the provisions of the Animal Welfare (Livestock Export) Bill not applying to Northern Ireland.

The Committee was content to note.

8.12 The Chairperson informed the Committee that it had received copied correspondence, dated 8 March 2024, from Minister Muir to McNamee McDonnell Solicitors regarding Lough Neagh and its ownership.

The Committee was content to note.

8.13 The Chairperson informed the Committee that it had received the Fourth Report from Examiner of Statutory Rules [ESR] dated 12 March 2024. The report includes SR 2024/31: The Farming for Generations Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024, that the ESR is content with the Department's approach.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the ESR's fourth report and agreed that they had considered this SR last week and had no objection to the rule.

8.14 The Chairperson informed the Committee that it had received correspondence, dated 12 March 2024, from Daithi McKay, RSPB, regarding work at Dungonnell Reservoir in County Antrim.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the correspondence and agreed to add this to the list of potential visits.

## **9. Draft Forward Work Programme**

The Committee noted that next week's meeting on 21 March 2024 is the last meeting prior to the Easter Recess.

**Agreed:** Committee will receive three briefings on 21 March from: The Ulster Farmers' Union; Northern Ireland Environment Link; and Office for Environmental Protection.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that at the first meeting post-Easter Recess on 11 April 2024 that they will have a pre- strategic planning briefing from RalSe.

## **10. AOB**

The Committee discussed the recent flooding of Newry, Downpatrick and Portadown and the compensation available to businesses but not to farmers whose lands have been equally affected.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister regarding the need for compensation for farmers whose fields are unworkable as a result of flooding.

## **11. Date, Time and Place of Next Meeting**

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on Thursday 21 March 2024, 10.00 am in Room 21.

The meeting went into private session at 13.26 pm

## **12. Briefing on Strategic Planning Day**

The Committee noted the Clerk's Memo on options for the Committee Strategic Planning Meeting and discussed formats and venues.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the Clerk's memo on the Strategic Planning Meeting and agreed to hold the meeting on either Thursday 25 April 2024 or Thursday 2 May 2024.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the day may consist of an informal briefing from the host, which would be followed by a private strategic planning meeting.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the team should contact suitable venues near Lough Neagh and commence to plan for the meeting.

**The Meeting adjourned at 13.30 pm**

**Signature:** .....

**Tom Elliott, Chairperson**

**Dated** .....