



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

**Minutes of Proceedings**

**30 April 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  
Gareth Wilson MLA

**Via Zoom:** Daniel McCrossan MLA  
Aoife Finnegan MLA

**In Attendance:** Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk  
Glenda Doherty, Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor  
Sarah Dowd, Clerical Officer

***The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:14am***

**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.

Declan McAleer MLA declared an interest in the Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill and that he is an executor and owner of a small farm in Co Tyrone.

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

**3. Chairperson's Business**

The Chairperson referred to the event held that morning in Parliament Buildings, attended by a number of Members, launching the Economic Impact Assessment report, commissioned by the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA), which he attended in his capacity as Chairperson.

The Committee noted that the report highlights the fundamental role of the sector in driving regional economic growth, sustaining rural communities, and strengthening food security and resilience.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from Councillor Greene of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council regarding the Minister's response to his concerns regarding any steps taken to establish if hormone-treated beef have entered supply chains in Northern Ireland.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 23 April, from Save Our Acute Services (SOAS) a community-based organisation based in the South West requesting a meeting to discuss Rural NI policy and rural health inequalities.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to arrange an informal meeting with SOAS in the early autumn.

The Chairperson referred to a Clerk's Memo regarding the Committee response to the Call for Evidence for The Criminal Justice (Sentencing etc) Bill issued by the Committee for Justice.

The Committee noted that although there are no provisions in the Bill relating specifically to agriculture, rural development or environmental protection, the Committee for Justice may wish to consider:

- How the proposed Sentencing Reform impacts rural communities, particularly around availability of unpaid work placements and access to supervision and rehabilitative services; and
- The effect of the new offence of assaulting Public Workers on those workers involved in an agricultural or environmental context, such as inspectors or enforcement officers.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to respond to the Committee for Justice highlighting the points raised.

The Chairperson referred to the Office for Environmental Protection's (OEP) report on the Nutrient Action Programme Regulations (2019) Northern Ireland, which was laid in the Assembly, on 29 April.

The Committee noted it will have an informal meeting via MS Teams with the OEP's Chief Scientist, Professor Robbie McDonald, to discuss the report and its findings on Tuesday 5 May at 4pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to the response from the Minister dated 29 April regarding the impact of rising fuel costs.

The Committee noted:

- The Minister recognises that rising costs can have a disproportionate impact on rural households and businesses and has called on the UK Government to deliver support;
- The NICS Strategic Policy Group (SPG) provides a forum to support strategic policy development and engagement on the emerging and medium-to longer-term impacts;
- A support package for farmers affected is not planned and existing supports include the Sustainable Agriculture Programme, (SAP) including the Farm Sustainability Payment.

The Committee noted it will have a joint informal round table discussion in relation to issues of the cost, supply and storage of fuel and fertiliser with the Committee for the Economy on Tuesday 5 May.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the response to the Committee for the Economy in advance of its informal discussions on 5 May.

#### **4. Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes, from its perspective, of the concurrent meeting with the Committee for Infrastructure held on 21 April 2026 and noted that the minutes are also with the Committee for Infrastructure for its agreement.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 23 April 2026.

#### **5. Matters Arising**

The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 21 April, regarding Dogs Trust decision to remove third-party public liability insurance from the Companion Club given the significant implications it may have for owners of exempted dogs.

The Committee noted from 1 July 2026 owners of these dogs will no longer be able comply with all of the exemption conditions as currently set out in the legislation and the Committee will be notified if new legislation is required.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered additional information regarding the OEP report on the Nutrient Action Programme Regulations (2019) Northern Ireland.

The Committee again noted it will have an informal meeting via MS Teams with the OEP's Chief Scientist, Professor Robbie McDonald to discuss the report on Tuesday 5 May at 4pm.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy confirming that Members from that Committee have agreed to attend the joint informal round table discussion in relation to issues of the cost, supply and storage of fuel and fertiliser on 5 May at 1pm in Room 30 Parliament Buildings.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

## **6. Areas of Natural Constraint (Payments Bill)**

The Committee considered the second draft Citizen Space Survey questions for the Committee's call for evidence.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed it was content with the draft Citizen Space Survey questions and to an eight week period for the survey.

***The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:25am***

## **7. Departmental Oral Evidence Session - The Farming with Nature Scheme (FwN)**

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Mr Manus McHenry, Deputy Director of Agricultural Policy, and
- Dr Devina Park, Grade 7, Farming with Nature Policy Unit,

Officials provided details of the uptake in Year one of the scheme and an update on proposals for Year two. The Committee heard that:

- The £2,500 minimum application value will be removed; the cap on the value of individual claims will increase to £20,000;
- The eligibility criteria will be expanded to include active Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) agreement holders;
- That actions offered to applicants will increase to 14 from the six available in 2025, and that the Department intends to add more in future years.

A question and answer session followed:

The Committee heard that although there were initial teething problems feedback from stakeholders to the first year of the scheme has been positive and that last year some applicants readjusted claims for work not done due to poor weather resulting in less spend than anticipated. Other areas of discussion included:

- Consideration of rewarding work undertaken by farmers in the management of hedgerows etc prior to the introduction of the FwN scheme;
- Efforts improve efficiency and administration of the scheme through technology based apps similar to the Scottish Farm Biodiversity Scotland app; and
- Actions taken to streamline and simplify the application process.

The Chairperson thanked the Officials for their attendance

***The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 10:53am***

***The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:53am***

## **8. SL1 The Sheep Carcase Classification and Price Reporting Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**

***This agenda item was recorded by Hansard***

The Committee noted the Department intends to make the SR under the draft affirmative procedure to introduce mandatory sheep carcase classification and price reporting in Northern Ireland and that it also makes classification of sheep carcasses aged less than 12 months and price reporting of the same, mandatory in Northern Ireland for all slaughterhouses which slaughter at least 1,000 sheep per week as a rolling annual average.

The Committee noted that Departmental officials provided an oral briefing on 26 February and then on 26 March it took evidence from representatives from NIMEA, ABP Food Group & Dunbia, outlining their concerns regarding the unintended consequences of the SR.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Dr Samantha Stewart, Head of Food Security, Beef, Sheep and Pig Policy; and
- Mr Kieran Coghlan, Deputy Principal, Food Security, Beef, Sheep and Pigs Policy,

The Committee heard further details of the rationale for the specifications in the draft Regulations addressing the issues raised by stakeholders in evidence provided to the Committee.

A question and answer session followed:

Members raised concerns and issues including:

- The impact on competitiveness arising from placing another regulatory burden on producers;
- The potential to slow the slaughter line down therefore adding additional costs;
- The tail specifications presenting a higher risk of contamination and potential hygiene issues; and
- The rationale for not applying the regulations to all sites, regardless of throughput.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it would write to the Department requesting clarification of the main reasons for implementing the changes; the rationale for having different regulatory framework systems in place; and a clear and concise comparable legislative table showing the variations in presentation of the carcass in the different jurisdictions.

***The Officials left the meeting at 11:11am***

#### **9. Dilapidation Bill - Informal Decision Making (Clause by Clause)**

The Chairperson stated that the Committee will move to making informal decisions on its agreement or otherwise with each Clause and any proposed amendments in closed session with the Assembly Bill Office Official.

The Committee agreed to go into Closed session and then return to public session to put any outstanding queries to the DAERA Bill Officials.

***The meeting went into closed session at 11:13am***

***The meeting resumed in public session at 12:57pm***

***The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 12:57pm***

#### **10. Dilapidation Bill - Evidence session with DAERA Bill Officials**

***This agenda item was recorded by Hansard***

The following Officials were in attendance:

- Simon Webb – DAERA Bill Team and;
- Mark Allison – DAERA Bill Team.

The Clerk gave a summary, for the record, of the matters discussed during the closed session and the Officials responded to the queries raised during discussions regarding proposed amendments including:

- Additional information to be included in the EFM regarding increase of penalties; and

- Differences in structural, residential, and visual amenity to be reflected in guidance with strong examples of scenarios included.

The Chairperson thanked the Officials for their attendance.

***The Departmental Bill Officials left the meeting at 1:12pm***

**11. The Hunting with Dogs Bill - Initial Briefing from Bill sponsor**

The Committee noted that the Hunting with Dogs Member's Bill sponsored by John Blair MLA was introduced to the Assembly on 27 April.

The Committee heard details of the proposed Bill, the purpose of which is to end, what is described as a form of extreme cruelty and that out 12,000 responses to the consultation, 72% of those from Northern Ireland were supportive of the Bill.

The Committee also heard it is an amendment to the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985 rather than a bespoke piece of legislation and that engagement with MLAs has been constructive.

A question and answer session followed:

The Committee heard some detail of the differences and changes to the previous Bill brought forward including better explanations on exemptions and that it reflects recent legislation brought forward in Scotland.

Members also highlighted concerns about distinguishing the differences between normal dog walkers and individuals or groups involved in hunting.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it would reserve its position on its support for the principles of the Bill and the Chair would reflect the issues raised in the Second Stage debate in the Assembly.

**12. SL1 Air Quality (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Committee noted that the Department intends to make the SR under the negative resolution procedure to amend annual average limits, targets and objectives contained within existing legislation: the Air Quality Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010 and the Air Quality Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003 to

ensure applicable annual mean limits, targets and objectives are more reflective of the concentrations of these pollutants being monitored in Northern Ireland at present.

The Committee also noted amending regulations also seek to correct typos, remove outdated references, and revoke the Air Quality (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2003.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note receipt of the SL1 and proposed statutory rule and that these will be published as part of the Committee's Call for Views on the proposal.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider the policy detail of the SL1 at the meeting on 28 May, when it will be briefed by Officials after the Committee has conducted and analysed responses to the Citizen Space survey.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that a briefing from officials is not necessary at this stage.

### **13. Departmental Written Briefing - Update on the DAERA-DAFM Shared Island Bioeconomy Demonstration Initiative (SIBDI)**

The Committee considered the written briefing providing a further update of the two successful projects that had been announced in an effort to accelerate transition to a growing blue bioeconomy across the Island.

The Committee noted details of the REGENERATE Green Agri-Bioeconomy Project in Northern Ireland led by Greenville Energy near Newtownstewart and also details of All Island Marine Bio-based Refineries for Circular Blue-Bioeconomy (AIMBIO) project in the Republic of Ireland led by Teagasc.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the written briefing.

### **14. Departmental Written Briefing – Animal Welfare Pathway Consultation**

The Committee noted the Department intends to launch an eight-week public consultation in May 2026 on a package of animal welfare proposals set out in the Animal Welfare Pathway 2025–27 to improve animal welfare standards, promote

responsible ownership, and ensure regulatory frameworks remain effective and proportionate.

The Committee noted the consultation will cover four policy proposals: regulation of rescue and rehoming organisations; an inflationary increase to dog licence fees; a ban on specific aversive training devices on cats and dogs; and strengthening dog microchipping requirements.

The Committee also noted the Consultation will also include a call for evidence on mandatory microchipping of pet cats.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the written briefing.

## 15. Correspondence

The Committee considered the Report on Fourth Statutory Review of the Groceries Code Adjudicator.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 23 April, from NIPSA requesting to engage with the Committee regarding the Veterinary Inspector Pay and Grading Dispute.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to invite a NIPSA delegation to brief the Committee.

The Committee considered a memo dated 23 April from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding the 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn - March (R12) Position and a copy of the briefing.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered the 63<sup>rd</sup> ESR Report dated 23 April which did not refer to any SRs relevant to the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a memo dated 23 April from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding the Marriage and Civil Partnership Bill requesting any

response the Committee may have, including a Nil Response, by noon on Tuesday 9 June.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed it was content to return a NIL response.

The Committee considered the ISNI report dated 26 April 2026.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

## **16. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

The Committee noted the AD stakeholder event will be held on Thursday 4 June from 5pm to 7pm at the Stormont Hotel with further details of the event to follow over the next couple of weeks, including a draft stakeholder list and draft format.

## **17. Any Other Business**

None

## **18. Date and Time of Next Meeting**

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 7 May at 10:00am in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the meeting pack for the meeting on 7 May would be issued on Tuesday 5 May due to the May Day public holiday.

***The meeting was adjourned at 1.34pm***

**Signature:** .....

**Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson**

**Dated** .....