Northern Ireland Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

24 September 2026

Meeting location: Room 21 Parliament Buildings

Present: Diana Armstrong (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Áine Murphy MLA
Gareth Wilson MLA

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:07am

1. Apologies

Aoife Finnegan MLA

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 the Hunting with Dogs Bill in relation to the Countryside Alliance Awards Ceremony in April 2026 regarding her nominating a Fermanagh based butcher and restaurant for an award.

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 as the Bill Sponsor.

Áine Murphy MLA declared an interest in the Hunting with Dogs Bill as a licensed fire arms holder.

Gareth Wilson MLA declared an interest in the Hunting with Dogs Bill as a Member of the British Association for Shooting and Conservation.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to a request from the Wastewater Infrastructure Group (WIG) to brief the Committee on the findings of its Report titled *Wastewater Constraints and the Cost of Delay in Northern Ireland: An Economy with the Brakes On,* and the relationship between wastewater investment and environmental recovery, and on its call for coordinated action across DAERA, the Department for Infrastructure, planning, development, and future capital funding.

The Chairperson suggested it may be more useful as a concurrent meeting with the Committee for Infrastructure.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Clerk would liaise with the Clerk to the Committee for Infrastructure to arrange a possible as a concurrent meeting with the Committee for Infrastructure in the first instance.

The Chairperson referred to an invitation from the British HydroPower Association to its conference in the Dunsilly Hotel, Antrim on Wednesday 7th October to explore

how environmental regulation can evolve to deliver healthier rivers, greater transparency, and better environmental outcomes.

Agreed: Committee Members agreed to respond to the invitation individually.

The Chairperson referred to an invitation to The North of Ireland Veterinary Association (NIVA) workshop meeting on Wednesday 7 October to be held at the T3 Conference Centre in Lisburn.

The Committee noted it is on the topic of farm animal endemic disease and will focus on the potential positive impact by improving farm animal health and to formulate what the core challenges are and suggest solutions for a roadmap for the Northern Ireland ruminant industry.

Agreed: Committee Members agreed to respond to invitation individually.

The Chairperson advised that Nigel Topping, the Chair of The Climate Change Committee (CCC), will be in Northern Ireland on 19 and 20 October and the Minister has suggested that the Committee may wish to meet with him informally on the afternoon of Monday 19 October.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee Team would plan for an informal meeting on 19 October, schedules permitting.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 17 September 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered correspondence dated 8 July from the Department for Communities to the Committee for Communities in response to queries raised at the concurrent Committee meeting on 21 May 2026 when Members received a briefing

from Officials from DfC, DfI, and DAERA regarding the cross-departmental Shaping Sustainable Places (SSP) Programme.

The Committee noted the correspondence provides a response to queries raised regarding links with crime and vacancy; interaction of SSP with the Dilapidation Bill and existing strategies; funding threshold and settlement sizes; planning flexibilities; and the definition of services and access to services.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFFN) representatives joined the meeting at 10:15am

Áine Murphy MLA joined the meeting at 10:19am

6. Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill – Oral Evidence Session with Nature Friendly Farming Network (NFFN)

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following NFFN representatives briefed the Committee:

• Mr Cormac Dolan, Northern Ireland Manager; and

• Ms Louise Skelly, Northern Ireland Vice Chair

The Committee also heard that NNFN would like to see an approach that rewards existing environmental assets, supports environmental improvements across all farmlands and considers that NI builds on programmes in the rest of the UK and the Republic of Ireland, including the Burren Programme and Environmental Land Management System.

The Committee heard that recognition of the natural capital and public benefits already being delivered by farmers in these areas should not be missed.

The Committee also heard that guaranteed long term funding is required and that any payment should be results and outcomes based and not taken from existing budgets to the detriment of existing Farming with Nature schemes.

The Committee also heard that farmers have a huge interest in environmental outcomes, but farms also need to be productive and financially stable.

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

- The need to maximise natural resources on farmland to ensure healthy animals; the production of healthy food and to reverse biodiversity decline;
- Support for a co design approach in the development of future agri-environment schemes;
- The need for recognition for environmental improvements already implemented by farmers;
- The lack of confidence preventing some farmers in Severely Deprived Areas (SDA) participating in Farming with Nature schemes due to feeling unable to meet or deliver on criteria and risk of being fined;
- The need for a Land Use strategy to plan for a long term overall direction for agriculture;
- Lessons learnt from approaches taken in the Republic of Ireland and other jurisdictions in the UK;
- Concerns that area based payments only will not necessarily create greater food production or environmental outcomes; and
- Concerns that funding will be diverted from existing agri-environmental scheme budgets.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The NNFN representatives left the meeting at 10:57am

The NI Environment Link (NIEL) representatives joined the meeting at 10:58am

7. Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill – Oral Evidence Session with NI Environment Link (NIEL)

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following NIEL representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr Peter McEvoy - Chair of the Sustainable Agriculture Policy Working Group;
- Mr Mark McCormick - Vice Chair of the Sustainable Agriculture Policy Working Group;
- Mr Mike McClure - Landscapes Lead; and
- Mr Peter Gallagher - High Nature Value Farm Adviser

The Committee heard that public investment for farms in Severely Disadvantaged Areas (SDA) should be viewed not only as agricultural support compensating for reduced production, but also as an investment in nature recovery, biodiversity conservation, carbon storage climate resilience and other environmental outcomes.

The Committee also heard that payments should be made from additional funding rather than diverting resources from the current agri-environment budget and with long term funding to give farmers the confidence to invest in environmental management.

The Committee heard that farmers in SDAs help to support cultural heritage; community cohesion and local tourism and are vital for the local economy but at present experience a lack of access to meaningful support and development funding.

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

- The need to have a holistic approach and link farm viability with environmental outcomes;
- How to measure environmental outcomes without increasing the administrative burden;
- Challenges for farmers in SDAs and the low uptake of existing farming schemes in those areas;
- Concerns at the possibility of land abandonment and the continuation of rural population decline due to lack of support for farmers in SDAs; and
- Financial disadvantage faced by farmers in SDAs.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The NIEL representatives left the meeting at 11:40am

Michelle McIlveen MLA left the meeting at 11:40am

The meeting was suspended at 11:40am

The meeting resumed at 11:51am

The British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC) representatives joined the meeting at 11:51am

8. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Oral Evidence session with the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC)

This item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted that given the nature of the Bill it has attracted groups in opposition to it wishing to give oral evidence to Committee. In the interests of balance, the Clerk approached several other groups for the potential, if Committee agreed, for them to give oral evidence and further support the Committee with its scrutiny.

The Committee noted the Animal Interfaith Alliance was approached but declined the potential to give oral evidence.

The Committee noted the RSPB was approached but declined the potential to give oral evidence, stating that as animal welfare does not come under its charitable objectives, they are not in a position to make representation in regard to the Bill.

The Committee noted that Wildlife Guardian were considered but it was understood that they work with League against Cruel Sports who are already attending an oral evidence session.

The Committee noted the Irish Council Against Blood Sports (ICABS) was approached and has expressed interest in giving oral evidence alongside Francis Ward of Stand With Foxes via Zoom.

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was content that the Irish Council Against Blood Sports (ICABS), joined by Stand with Foxes give oral evidence by Zoom.

The Committee noted Action Against Foxhunting (AAF) was approached and is presently considering the Bill to see if it has information that would be helpful to the Committee's scrutiny.

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was content that the AAF give oral or written evidence if the AAF believe it has a contribution to make.

The Committee considered the Convention Rights Memorandum prepared by the Assembly Legal Services Office.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to cover the matters raised in the memorandum during the Committee Bill deliberations.

The Committee considered three items of correspondence from individuals who have expressed concern at the extension of the Committee stage until 5 February 2027 and requesting that the Committee conclude its scrutiny and report on the Bill before Christmas recess.

The Chairperson acknowledged the concerns raised and stated for the record that the Committee Stage is a matter for the Committee; the timetable has been discussed with the Bill Office; and the Committee as previously stated will endeavour to complete in advance of the extension date.

9. Oral Evidence session with the British Association for Shooting and Conservation (BASC)

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr Tommy Mayne – Director for Northern Ireland;
- Dr Alex Murray – Head of Law; and
- Mr Glynn Evans - Head of Game & Wildlife.

The Committee heard that BASC strongly oppose the Bill, views as unworkable and, believes that it will negatively affect activities such as land management, game management, pest control, predator control, gamekeeping, and working dog training.

The Committee also heard that the main concerns include the breadth of the offences, combined with the structure of exemptions and the absence of clear limiting definitions include the meaning of participating and what constitutes hunting, thereby creating uncertainty in the practical application of the legislation.

The Committee also heard concerns regarding unintended consequences of the Bill and that consideration should be given to whether alternative control methods are effective and capable of achieving the same animal welfare outcomes.

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

- Concerns at the practicalities of lawful land management and pest control activities with the two dog limit;

- Concerns at the potential for delay in the return of firearms following seizure due to prolonged investigations into any alleged offence;
- Comparison with similar legislation and exemptions in other UK jurisdictions;
- Concerns in relation to uncertainly interpreting the legislation regarding potential liability and reputational risk;
- Unintended consequences on owners of working dogs and pet dogs;
- Potential negative impact on pest control including the control of rabbits; and
- Differences between shooting for food and hunting for recreation.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The BASC representatives left the meeting at 12:47pm

The Countryside Alliance representatives joined the meeting at 12:48pm

10. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Oral Evidence session with the Countryside Alliance

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr Gary McCartney, Northern Ireland Regional Director;
- Mr Colin Dougan, Member; and
- Mr John Larkin KC, Legal Advisor

The Committee heard that the Countryside Alliance oppose the Bill, believe it is not built on evidence, lacks clear definitions creating uncertainty; and recommends a withdrawal of the Bill and a new co-design process with stakeholder input.

The Committee heard hunting with dogs to manage wild mammals Is no worse than alternative methods which are not always practical and effective and the inability to use terrier dogs will create unintended consequences and have a negative effect on animal welfare.

The Committee also heard the Bill does not distinguish between pest control and sport and the impact on communities and reliant businesses will be far-reaching and potentially hugely damaging, undermining the ability of land managers, farmers and conservationists to use dogs in the control of pests.

The Committee also heard the penalties are disproportionate, excessive, may expose farmers to vexatious complaints and could expose an ordinary dog walker to criminal liability if their dog unexpectedly chases a rabbit or squirrel.

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

- Protections for ordinary dog walkers being inadvertently caught up in a hunt;
- Comparison with practical experience of similar legislation introduced in Scotland;
- Review of the proposed penalties contained in the Bill;
- The need for Northern Ireland to have its own independent review on animal welfare.
- Evidence and rationale behind the proposed two dog limit as opposed to a pack;
- Practicalities arising from a lack of clear definitions such as control and participation; and
- The unintended consequences for animal welfare.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The Countryside Alliance representatives left the meeting at 1:35pm

11. NIEA Interim Business Plan - 2026-2027

The Committee noted the Plan provides initial direction for this financial year, sets out commitments for the year ahead and supports delivery of key Ministerial Pledges within the DAERA Corporate Plan 2025–27.

The Committee noted that as NIEA does not yet have an agreed Budget for 2026-27, the Department of Finance Permanent Secretary has provided contingency planning envelopes to DAERA to represent funding expected to be reflected in a Budget position brought to the Executive for consideration.

The Committee also noted the Plan will be subject to review, and revision once final budget decisions are confirmed and therefore the commitments set out should be regarded as provisional, and subject to change.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

12. Departmental Written Briefing - NIEA Charging Scheme Review and Consultations Planned for 2026

The Committee considered the written briefing noting NIEA charging schemes have not been fully reviewed for over 15 years and an initial review has found that current fees do not cover fully the costs of regulation and that the Department now proposes to consult on a revised set of schemes to be conducted over two phases.

The Committee noted the first phase consultation will commence in 2026/early 2027, for what are classed as straightforward schemes for implementation in the financial year 2027/2028; and the second phase consultation, for more complex schemes will commence in 2027 with implementation for the financial year 2028/2029.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the briefing.

13. End of Session Report 2025-2026

Agreed: The Committee agreed that due to time constraints it would return to consider and agree the report at the meeting on Tuesday 29 September.

14. Correspondence

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

Correspondence from the Department, dated 18 September, regarding the Ministers Approval of Round 4 Airport (Belfast International Airport) Noise Action Plan 2023-2028.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 17 September, from the Clerk to the Committee for The Executive Office regarding The Prevalence and Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) in Northern Ireland Report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for comments on the report.

A memo dated 16 September, from the Clerk to the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) regarding its Review into the development of a formal process and guidance on the handling of Westminster Statutory Instruments that include a role for the Assembly.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Notification of the KESS Series 9 Programme (Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series), which will run from 7 October 2026 - 10 February 2027.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The 73rd Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules which has drawn attention of the Assembly to S.R. 2026/124: The Dangerous Dogs (Compensation and Exemption Schemes) (Amendment) Order (Northern Ireland) 2026 in relation to the Department's breach of the 21 day rule and in relation to drafting matters.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Items of correspondence that the Committee has been copied into between Defra and the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee providing further updates to a range of matters within the scope of the Windsor Framework relating to:

- certain production, labelling and certification rules and certain rules on trade with third countries;
- the simplification and strengthening of food and feed safety requirements;
- the production and marketing of plant reproductive material; and
- the production and marketing of forest reproductive material

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence the Committee has been copied into from an individual to the Minister, dated 19 September, requesting he take action to reduce marine wildlife bycatch and improve protections for marine wildlife in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

15. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

16. Any Other Business

A Member raised a matter in relation to Bovine TB, in light of concerns expressed from farmers at the practical difficulties in isolating infected animals, due to the length of time it takes from when the Department agrees TB compensation, to the subsequent collection of the animals for slaughter.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek clarity regarding the timescales involved.

17. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 29 September at 10:00am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned 1.39pm

Signature: ……..

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated …….