



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

## Minutes of Proceedings

15 May 2025

### Assembly Marquee at the Balmoral Show

**Present:** Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)  
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
John Blair MLA  
Aoife Finnegan MLA  
William Irwin MLA  
Patsy McGlone MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Áine Murphy MLA

**Apologies:** Tom Buchanan MLA

**In Attendance:** Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk  
Mr Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Mr Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor  
Ms Sarah Preece, Clerical Officer

***The Meeting Opened in Public Session at 10:12am***

#### **1. Apologies**

Tom Buchanan MLA

## **2. Declaration of Interests**

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

William Irwin MLA declared he is a partner in a farm business.

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

The Chair referred to a memo from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy regarding the invitation for members of that Committee to attend the informal Q&A session with Young Farmers after the main meeting.

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

## **4. Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting on 8 May were agreed and signed by the Chair to be published.

**Agreed:** The Minutes were agreed.

## **5. Matters Arising**

The Committee noted that there were no Matters Arising to consider.

***The Ulster Farmers Union (UFU) representatives joined the meeting at 10:13am***

***Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting at 10:20am***

***Patsy McGlone MLA joined the meeting at 10:47am***

## **6. Oral briefing from the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU)**

The following UFU representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr William Irvine, President of the UFU; and
- Mr Alexander Kinnear, Parliamentary Officer, UFU.

The representatives briefed the Committee on the current issues facing their members including: proposed inheritance tax changes; the Nutrients Action Program Consultation; the Bovine TB in Northern Ireland Blueprint for Eradication; the Ammonia strategy and future support for the farming industry.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard that farmers understand the need to improve water quality but not to the detriment of the farming industry and that the consultation period for the NAP 2026 – 2029 is too short and that there had been a lack of engagement on the new additions to the NAP and no attempt by DAERA to co- design the NA( 2026 – 2029.

The Committee heard fears that implementation of the NAP proposals could devastate the industry, in particular smaller farms due to increased costs of purchasing Low Emission Slurry Spreading Equipment (LESSE) equipment and meeting strict new phosphorus limits which leaves the only options of finding more land for slurry spreading or cutting livestock numbers.

Some Members expressed concern that the proposals were more focused on penalties rather than offering guidance and incentives for farmers.

The Committee heard that Bovine TB remains a matter of deep concern and called upon DAERA to do more to deal with the issue as it is costing DAERA a huge amount of money each year and is impacting farmers mental health as well as their finances and viability of farms.

The Committee heard that farmers felt that the work done by them to reduce the environmental impact of agriculture is not recognised and that it may take years for the results to become apparent and that their efforts have been overlooked.

The Committee heard that the issue of ammonia continues to pose significant challenges for the farming sector, particularly in relation to planning applications and called for a clear strategy from DAERA to address the issue in delays.

The Chair thanked representatives for their attendance.

***The UFU representatives left the meeting at 11:16am***

***The Young Farmers Club representatives joined the meeting at 11:16am***

## **7. Oral briefing from the Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster (YFCU)**

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Richard Beattie (President of YFCU);
- Joyce Allen (Vice-President of YFCU); and
- Sarah Halliday (Secretariat – AERA Committee, YFCU).

The Committee was briefed on the range of programmes for young farmers undertaken by the YFCU, as well as the issues and challenges facing young farmers in Northern Ireland.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard concerns regarding the significant barrier to entry for young farmers being the limited availability of access to land and difficulties securing financing, which offers little security for long-term investment and planning.

Thus making it difficult to invest in environmental and sustainability initiatives, such as improving soil quality. Another area of concern the Committee heard about was future succession planning and issues surrounding delays in planning applications for replacement farm buildings.

The Committee also heard that proposed changes to Agricultural Property Relief and inheritance tax policies have raised concerns among young farmers as well as the potential impact of the proposed new Nutrients Action Programme which they feel will disproportionately affect them.

The Committee heard that Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) remains a significant challenge young farmers who feel they are disproportionately affected as they often have smaller herds, so loss of even a few animals can impact on farm viability and also on their mental health – all causing further financial strain.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

***The YFCU representatives left the meeting at 11:56am***

## **8. Departmental written briefing DAERA Final Budget 2025-26**

The Committee noted it is due to take an oral briefing from the Department on 5 June regarding the final budget position and June Monitoring and sought this written update to inform it of any changes from the Draft Budget 2025 allocations in advance of the debate on 19 May.

The Committee noted the Final Budget 2025-26 opening allocations for DAERA is £599.5m Resource DEL, £31.8m Ringfenced Resource DEL and £119.5m Capital DEL as agreed by the Executive on 3 April.

The Committee noted in relation to Resource DEL, the only change from the Draft Budget 2025-26 allocations was an additional £3.4m Resource DEL for the pay award from 1 August 2025.

The Committee noted the Department states it is an extremely difficult outcome and further work will be required as part of the June Monitoring Round to determine the extent of these pressures across the Department.

The Committee noted in relation to Capital DEL, there is no change from the Draft Budget 2025-26 Capital DEL allocation of £119.5m.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek clarity in relation to the £0.7m against the Future Rural Policy, DAERA Opening Capital DEL Budget 2025-26 Allocations.

## **9. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

## **10. Any Other Business**

None.

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

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on Thursday 22<sup>nd</sup> May at 10.00am in Parliament Buildings, Room 21.

***The meeting was adjourned at 11:59am***

**Signature: .....**

**Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson**

**Dated .....**