



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

25 June 2026

Meeting location: Portaferry Hotel, Portaferry

Present: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Gareth Wilson 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 10:19am

1. Apologies

Tom Buchanan MLA

Aoife Finnegan MLA

Áine Murphy MLA

Daniel McCrossan MLA

2. Declaration of Interests

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

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

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to correspondence to the Clerk, dated 19 June, from the Countryside Alliance Ireland concerning the structure and framing of the Call for Evidence on the Hunting with Dogs Bill.

The Chairperson also referred to the Clerk's response clarifying the purpose of the Call for Views seeking views on the Clauses of the Bill as Introduced.

The Committee noted the Clerk has received a further email from the Countryside Alliance and has sought guidance from the Clerk Assistant before sending a further reply.

Agreed: The Committee was content that the Clerk would issue a further reply once she has received advice from the Clerk Assistant.

The Chairperson referred to a Draft Press Release regarding the Committee's visit to Portaferry.

Agreed: The Committee was content that the press release to be published as drafted.

The Chairperson referred to the planned meeting on Tuesday 30 June to consider a series of Climate Action Plan (CAP) briefings.

The Committee noted Officials have now advised that they will have to postpone due to unforeseen delays and hope to be in a position to brief the Committee in the near future.

The Committee noted its disappointment as it was DAERA Officials who requested the meeting and that there may be scheduling difficulties after recess as it will then be dealing with the Committee Stage for three Bills.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note and return to the matter after recess.

The Chairperson referred to the launch of the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) first statutory report on the Environmental Improvement Plan in Parliament Buildings on 24 June.

The Committee noted the Chairperson was in attendance as sponsor of the event and on behalf of the Committee he had welcomed the new Chair of the OEP, Dame Helen Ghosh, and wished her well in her role.

The Committee noted the good, productive relationship it has had with the OEP throughout this mandate and highlighted the various evidence sessions with the OEP since March 2024.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 18 June 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered correspondence from the Minister, dated 18 June, in response to a request for clarification regarding the Department's response to Chicken Litter Export Issues and Poultry Sector Pressures.

The Committee noted the Minister advised that the matter falls under the control of the Secretary of State for Efra in line with the Windsor Framework but that the Department for Agriculture Fisheries and the Marine (DAFM) has lifted the temporary

suspension on movements of manure, including poultry litter from Northern Ireland to the Republic of Ireland.

The Committee noted that Shared Environmental Services were due to meet with the Minister to discuss the issues, and other matters, and the Committee has sought an update on the outcome of the meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note and to keep a watching brief on the matter.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 19 June, regarding queries raised relating to the Reported Destruction within the Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Special Area of Conservation at Bonds Glen Road, following its informal meeting on 26 May with the Bonds Glen Environmental Group.

The Committee noted the Department's responses relating to:

- The difference in approach and outcomes between NIEA investigations, subsequent council enforcement action taken;
- Whether NIEA believes there are gaps or limitations in its current powers;
- Steps to improve inter-agency and inter-departmental coordination, particularly in cases involving environmental protection, planning enforcement, and wildlife conservation; and
- NIEA's engagement with the site owner and any concerns regarding compliance with the Council's enforcement notice or the owner's future intentions for the site.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a memo, dated 19 June, from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy regarding the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) Review of domestic heating oil market noting that the Committee for the Economy will be in contact regarding a possible joint concurrent meeting to receive a briefing from the CMA after recess.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 11 June, from Farmers for Action (FFA) noting it had been considered at the last meeting, requesting to meet the Committee to discuss Lough Neagh and its proposal to take a NI Farm Welfare Bill forward as an Emergency Bill.

The Committee noted advice received from the Bill Office stating that there is an accelerated passage process (Standing Order 42) but that is a procedural matter for an Executive Bill that is considered once a Bill is introduced.

The Committee considered its correspondence, dated 4 June 2025, issued to FFA laying out its consideration of the matters to that date of the proposed Bill, its legal advice, related food supply chain issues and an update on the Committee's consideration of the matters.

The Committee noted its position at that time was that its consideration of the matter was concluded.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to re-issue its letter from June 2025 to FFA and will continue to monitor the Lough Neagh situation and the impact of the Lough Neagh Action Plan.

The Northern Ireland Fisherman's Federation (NIFF)- [representing Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation (ANIFPO)] & The Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation Ltd (NIFPO) representatives joined the meeting at 10:30am

6. Briefing from the Northern Ireland Fisherman's Federation – [representing Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation (ANIFPO)] & The Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation Ltd (NIFPO)

The Committee considered a DAERA press release, dated 19 June, announcing that the £3.05m Marine Environment and Fisheries Fund for Northern Ireland is now open for applications.

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Dr Lynn Gilmore - CEO , NIFPO;

- Mr Trevor Mckee - Chairperson NIFPO;
- Mr Ben Collier - Fisheries Conservation Technologist, (NIFF) [(representing ANIFPO)]; and
- Mr Adam Holland - Sustainability Officer, (NIFF) [(representing ANIFPO)]

The Committee heard that the industry is facing a Perfect Storm of challenges due to:

- Spatial Squeeze in fishing areas;
- Access to labour and high reliance on foreign crew;
- Escalating costs and English language requirements for Skilled Workers Visas and the potential cliff edge scenario as they will no longer be available from 2027;
- Price decreases for raw product;
- A reduction of 20% in Nephrops quota equating to a £3.5m loss; and
- Increasing fuel prices and price shocks due to global events.

The Committee heard that it has developed an industry owned roadmap that will integrate the social, environmental, and economic requirements of a modern, resilient, and future-ready industry.

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

- a balanced and joined up planning system which protects key Irish Sea fishing grounds to counter the loss of fishing grounds due to spatial squeeze;
- the challenges presented due to the Isle of Man exclusion of Northern Irish vessels with overseas crew;
- Support for a proposal to the Home Office for a bespoke fishing visa for 10 months of the year;
- Calls for fuel support similar to the Republic of Ireland and other UK jurisdictions such as Scotland;
- Concerns regarding the effect on the industry of the proposed new Marine Protected Areas;
- The possibility of the introduction of resilience payments; and
- A call for a UK wide Fishing Industry task force.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share details of the work the Committee has undertaken in this matter including correspondence with the Isle of Man Government and Minister Muir regarding the Isle of Man's exclusion of Northern Irish vessels with overseas crew.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the British Irish Council outlining the Committee concerns of the issues impacting on the fishing industry.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and ask if they would consider investigating the viability of a framework for resilience for the Fishing Industry similar to one offered to the farming industry.

The Northern Ireland Fisherman's Federation (NIFF)- [representing Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation (ANIFPO)] & The Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation Ltd (NIFPO) representatives left the meeting at 11:37am

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11:38am

7. Oral Briefing from The Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs - Role of DAERA at Exploris Aquarium

The following Officials from the Marine and Fisheries Division briefed the Committee:

- Ms Claire Vincent - Deputy Director; and
- Dr Liz Pothanikat - Head of Marine Conservation Branch

The Committee were given an overview of the work of the Department with Exploris Seal Sanctuary to fulfil its obligations under the Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1995.

The Committee heard that the Environment Fund grant (80% from DAERA, 20% match funded) is for the operation of the seal sanctuary and rehabilitation of sick and abandoned Harbour seal pups.

The Committee also heard details of the EU-funded INTERREG VA SeaMonitor project designed to test the suitability of rescue and rehabilitation as an intervention method.

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

- the adequacy of the environmental grant fund;
- the reason for the decline in the number of harbour seals;
- the effect of Marine Wildlife Disturbance Guidance (2025) on changing public behaviour;
- the positive impact of public education campaigns to address the decline in numbers.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11:58am

8. Departmental written briefing - Technical Amendments to the Rules Governing Fruit and Vegetable Aid Scheme (FVAS) using Powers in the Agriculture Act (NI) 2025

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 19 June, from NI Horticulture PO Limited and NI Horticultural Growers Limited requesting that amendments are not brought into legislation until a full industry consultation has been undertaken and any potential impacts addressed.

The Committee noted the Department wishes to consult with stakeholders to seek views on some technical changes in advance of drafting the legislation.

The Committee noted the changes include: ensuring only Northern Ireland growers with a PO head office based in NI can benefit from support; making consequential amendments specifically on the new Article 32(1A) inserted by the Act; inserting new appeal/review provisions for Departmental decisions made in relation to the FVAS; updating of double funding rules; removal of scope for advance payments; provision for off-setting; and updating on-the-spot checks requirements.

The Committee noted other changes being considered include a better reflection of FVAS law as Northern Ireland rather than EU legislation; and scope to better align the scheme with DAERA strategic priorities, monitoring, evaluation and reporting requirements.

The Committee noted Officials will brief the Committee on the outcome of the engagement process and further changes, including those to develop a suitable replacement for the FVAS in Northern Ireland in due course.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence, dated 19 June, from NI Horticulture PO Limited and NI Horticultural Growers Limited to the Department.

9. Departmental written briefing on the Shaping Sustainable Places Programme and Allocation of the £50m DAERA Contribution

The Committee noted it had a joint concurrent meeting on 21 May with the Committees for Communities and Infrastructure and was briefed by Officials on the Programme which the Department for Communities as lead Department, intends to launch in Autumn 2026, pending Ministerial and Executive approval.

The Committee noted the briefing is in response to its request detail of how the DAERA £50m contribution as part of the wider £150 million capital programme to be delivered over the next decade will be deployed within rural areas.

The Committee noted in relation to allocation breakdown, as the programme remains subject to formal approval, confirmed allocations cannot yet be provided. However, funding methodology will support only eligible rural settlements with a population of 5,000 or fewer and take account of the issues experienced by rural communities.

The Committee also noted in relation to Rural Impact Plans, Councils, as delivery partners in identifying and prioritising regeneration initiatives, will be provided with robust guidance, and encouraged to work with local communities to shape proposals and develop action plans.

The Committee noted in terms of an Assessment Framework, there will be a Strategic Oversight Board and Programme Board to undertake governance and monitoring and a Memorandum of Understanding will set out the respective roles and responsibilities of DAERA, DfC and DfI.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking a further written update after recess and to ask if lessons have been learnt from the outworkings of COVID Recovery Small Settlements Regeneration Programme

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

The Committee noted it considered the SL1 briefly at the last meeting and agreed to return to the matter.

The Committee considered a Clerk's Memo, dated 16 June detailing the background to the matter and covering the issues raised at the informal meeting between Chairperson, the Deputy Chair and the Minister on 15 June,

The Committee noted the Minister stated that he was meeting the councils on 16 June on the matter and that DAERA will support the councils as far as possible going forward.

The Committee noted this matter arises from the Dogs Trust decision to remove the third-party public liability insurance benefit from its Companion Club from 1 July and the significant impact this will have on owners of exempted dogs being the only way for them to comply with the Dangerous Dogs Order.

The Committee noted the Department have now proceeded with a legislative amendment to remove the insurance requirement for prohibited breeds - consistent with the approach now being taken in all other UK jurisdictions and as the third-party public liability insurance benefit ends on 30 June, the Minister requested Committee agreement to an expedited Committee scrutiny process.

The Committee noted the purpose of the SR under negative resolution procedure is to remove the legal requirement to have third-party liability insurance in place for prohibited breeds and also to introduce a new exemption condition which requires that children under the age of 12 not be left in close proximity to a prohibited breed in a home or private setting without adult supervision.

The Committee noted it will come into operation on a phased basis, with the removal of the insurance requirement taking effect from 1 July. The introduction of the new exemption condition will take effect from 1 November as there is a need to get councils on board and get owners prepared.

The Committee noted the Call for Views closes on 27 June and to date has received zero responses.

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

11. Correspondence

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

Correspondence, dated 16 June, from the Department regarding the Consultation on proposed amendments to the Irish Whiskey Technical File that will run from 26 June to 4 September.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence, dated 12 June, from the Department regarding the DAERA Interim Business Plan 2026-27 which sets out the Department's key commitments for the year ahead, supports delivery of the DAERA Corporate Plan 2025–27, and aligns with the Programme for Government.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence, dated 17 June, from the Clerk to the Committee for Communities providing a copy of a reply from the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People (NICCY) regarding the consistency and effectiveness of Child Rights Impact Assessments (CRIAs) and Equality Impact Assessments (EQIAs).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence, dated 19 June, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding the 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence, dated 18 June, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding an update on Cash Profiles and Use of Vote on Account.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence that the Committee has been copied into between Defra and the Chair of the House of Lords NI Scrutiny Committee regarding a Final Proposal for Regulation Regarding the Simplification and Strengthening of Food and Feed Safety Requirements.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence from Belfast City Council, dated 15 June, concerning the challenges and risks in relation to the withdrawal of funding of the Animal Welfare Service and requesting the Committee seek assurances from the Department that it will work with councils to establish a sustainable long-term funding and governance framework.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A copy of The Northern Ireland Fiscal Council's Sustainability Report 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The New Pivotal Report titled: Improving the institutions: suggested reforms to the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence, dated 18 June, from a community-led group known as Residents Against Incineration (RAIn), requesting to discuss with the Committee its concerns at a proposal by AIC Group to develop a waste incineration facility at 115 Milltown Road, Benburb.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to wish to add the group to the informal meeting list.

Correspondence the Committee has been copied into from an individual to the Minister regarding Strengthening measures to safeguard marine life in Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted the email is representative of approximately 40 others - all of which can be accessed in the Committee Office if Members wish to see all the similar emails.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

The Committee considered a draft of the Newspaper Adverts for Hunting with Dogs Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to publish the adverts.

13. Any Other Business

None

14. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 2 July at 10:00am in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned 12:08pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated