



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

## Minutes of Proceedings

**4 December 2025**

**Meeting location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast**

**Present:** Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)  
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
Tom Buchanan MLA  
Aoife Finnegan MLA  
William Irwin MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Áine Murphy MLA

**In Attendance:** James Gilsenan, Acting Assembly Clerk  
Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor  
Sarah Dowd, Clerical Officer

***The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:05am***

## **1. Apologies**

John Blair MLA

Daniel McCrossan MLA

## **2. Declaration of Interests**

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

Declan McAleer MLA declared that he is an executor and owner of a small farm in Co Tyrone.

Tom Buchanan MLA declared an interest as a partner in a farm business.

William Irwin MLA declared an interest as a partner in a farm business.

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

The Chair referred to the Minister's Statement on the Bluetongue Virus Suspect made to the House on 1 December and noted that the disease's arrival adds to the list of animal health and welfare issues facing the Department in addition to Asian hornets, the spread of Avian flu and BovineTB.

The Committee noted a 20 km Temporary Control Zone (TCZ) has been established around premises near Bangor extending across Belfast Lough into Antrim.

The Chair expressed concern for farmers affected and called for vigilance by farmers.

The Chair added that Committee members have heard some concerns regarding the timeline of the outbreak between notification and test results.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department and seek clarity on the timeline and to confirm if the Department has sufficient resources to manage the outbreak.

The Chair referred to an informal meeting with farmers and Ulster Farmers Union (UFU) representatives on their concerns regarding the management of bTB on 2 December and that a note of the meeting would be distributed to Members by email.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to invite Rural Support to brief the Committee about its work.

**Agreed:** the Committee agreed to invite the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association (NIMEA) to brief the Committee about its work and the impact of cattle making it to the slaughterhouse before lesions are discovered.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department for an update on the TB Working Groups' recommendations to the Minister and the wildlife actions that were discussed by the Minister last year.

#### **4. Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 27 November 2025.

**The Committee agreed to take agenda item 6 next**

***Minister Muir, the Permanent Secretary Mrs Katrina Godfrey and David Kyle the Deputy Chief Veterinary Officer joined the meeting at 10:06am***

***Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting at 10:12am***

#### **6. Ministerial Evidence Session - Update on Legislative Programme, current issues and future plans**

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

The Minister briefed the Committee on the Department's work programme for the months ahead and an update on the Corporate plan.

Topics included: Animal Welfare and health; Climate change and the Climate Action Plan; the need to set up a Just Transition Commission; the importance of environmental governance and the creation of the Independent Environmental Agency in the face of issues such as Lough Neagh and the Mobuoy illegal dump; the

Windsor framework and plans for an Agri Food agreement; and forthcoming legislation.

The Minister highlighted the current and ongoing pressures facing the Department including dealing with Blue Tongue Virus and Avian Flu and advised that TB eradication remained a priority.

There then followed a question and answer session and areas of discussion included: the impact of staff vacancies on the Departments ability to exercise its statutory duties; barriers to recruitment of veterinary staff and steps taken to provide support for staff; farmers' lack of confidence in the Department; timeline for publication of the Rural Policy Framework; the Departments efforts to reduce and eradicate TB; the impact of Climate change targets; and consideration of additional support for the agri food sector in particular those vulnerable to weather.

A Member raised the issue of cross border movement of poultry farm litter and the Minister advised that Officials would provide the Committee with an update.

The Minister also provided Members with an update on Blue Tongue virus and the Departments response. The Minister advised that the current focus is on management of the disease and that compensation claims will have to be managed within existing department budgets. The Committee also heard there is no danger to public health or food safety and also noted that there is no rationale for the culling of cattle at this time and that the Department is confident it has sufficient capacity for testing.

A Member requested further details regarding herd movements in connection with the outbreak and the Minister advised that officials would provide further information.

In response to a query raised by a member regarding the genotyping scheme and comparison with the take up rate of any similar schemes in the Republic of Ireland the Committee was advised that officials would provide further information.

The Chair thanked the Minister the Permanent Secretary and the Deputy Chief Veterinary Officer for their attendance and requested that the Minister would provide a further briefing early in the new year.

***The Minister, the Permanent Secretary and the Deputy Chief Veterinary Office left the meeting at 11:38am***

**The Committee agreed to move on to agenda item 7**

***Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11:39am***

**7. Departmental Oral Evidence Session - Environmental Principles Policy Statement (EPPS)**

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

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Mr Shane Doris - Director of Environmental Resources Policy Division;
- Nigel Chambers - Assistant Director of Environmental Resources Policy Division; and
- Mr Chris Conway - Head of Environmental Principles and OEP Liaison Branch

The Committee heard The Environment Act 2021 imposes a statutory duty on DAERA to publish an EPPS and also a statutory duty on all departments and on UK Government Ministers, when making policy for Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the EPPS.

The Committee heard that the principles are not new but under the EPPS regime, policymakers will have to consider the principles in a more overt way.

There then followed a question-and-answer session and areas of discussion included: clarification of what constitutes “due regard”; potential blockages to planning applications and legislative powers to implement the EPPS.

The Committee noted that it would return to the matter in the new Year and a further oral briefing from Officials may be requested.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek a briefing from Assembly research on the design and implementation of principles in other UK jurisdictions and the Republic of Ireland.

***The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11:55am***

***The Committee agreed to move to agenda item 5***

**5. Matters Arising**

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department dated 28 November providing an update on DAERA Planning Performance.

The Committee noted the response provided a breakdown of the current backlog of 353 consultations and a table of response times but re iterated that due to staff resource pressures and the complex nature of the planning consultations it is not possible to give an accurate timeframe for clearing the backlog.

The Committee also noted that due to recruitment competitions it is anticipated that most vacant scientific posts will be filled in the first quarter of 2026/27.

The Committee also noted that a Planning Improvement Plan has been developed within NED and that although staff have redeployed where possible this is limited due to resource pressures for other key priorities such as Lough Neagh and the Environmental Improvement Programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request a further update from the Department regarding the longest waiting time by sector.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department dated 28 November providing an update on the Lough Neagh Action Plan in response to the Committee request for clarification what actions are being considered to bring appropriate parts of Lough Neagh into public ownership.

The Committee noted the Ministers preference is community ownership however, the immediate focus remains upon tackling the pollution and implementation of the Lough Neagh Action Plan.

The Committee noted The Lough Neagh Partnership is working on a two-year Lough Neagh heritage resilience project which will include the feasibility of acquiring and transferring ownership to the public or community ownership and that the project's long term plan is due to be published later this month.

The Committee also noted it has requested an oral briefing from officials in the New Year.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department dated 28 November providing an update on the AFBI data breach and noted a draft report from the independent investigation is currently under consideration by AFBI's senior management team and board.

The Committee noted Officials are available to brief the Committee following the conclusion of the audit and after detailed consideration of the report.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request an oral briefing in the New Year following the conclusion of the independent report.

### **8.SL1 The Bovine Genetics Genotyping Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025**

The Committee noted the Department intends to make a Statutory Rule under the negative resolution procedure to provide it with the legal powers to implement the Bovine Genetics Genotyping Scheme.

The Committee noted on 25 September it received an oral briefing and was broadly supportive of the scheme, but some Members had concerns regarding communication of the scheme and the connections to conditionality and that if it became compulsory in the future it may impact on farm payments.

The Committee noted it considered the Departments response to the request for clarity regarding the voluntary nature of the scheme and if there are plans to introduce regulations post 2026 / 27 to make future participation mandatory at the meeting of 13 November.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content for the Department to make the Statutory Rule."

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content for the Department proceeds to make the Statutory Rule.

### **9. Legislative Consent Motion (LCM)- Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Bill**

The Committee considered the LCM for the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Bill which was introduced in the House of Commons on 10 September.

The Committee noted the LCM was laid on 24 November and the Bill will provide the legal framework for the United Kingdom to fully implement its international obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (the BBNJ Agreement).

The Committee also noted the Bill amends the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 and the Marine Works (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2007 to align the marine licensing regimes with the BBNJ EIA process in respect of activities in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

The Committee noted the scrutiny period of 15 working days will end on 12 December and the Committee will consider and submit a report as per procedure.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to support the Minister in seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the Legislative Consent Motion.

### **10.SI The Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) Order 2026**

The Committee noted the Draft Order will be laid under Draft Affirmative Resolution procedure and will make amendments to the Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme Order 2020, which established the UK Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS) and makes a number of technical changes to the free allocation calculation for the next allocation period from 2027.

The Committee noted it also sets out the pathway to further reforms aligned with the introduction of the UK Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) in 2027 and

designed to ensure that free allocation continues to provide support to UK industry during the transition to net zero.

The Committee noted it will receive an oral briefing from Officials on 15 January.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider the matter further when it receives an oral briefing from Officials on 15 January.

## 11. Correspondence

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to deal with the following correspondence by exception and noted the Clerk's Memo on Correspondence:

- Correspondence from the Department dated 25 November regarding notification of the publication of the Main Authority Response to a consultation on 'UK Emissions Trading Scheme Scope Expansion: Maritime'; and the Consultation on 'UK Emissions Trading Scheme Scope Expansion: Emissions from International Maritime Voyages'.
- Correspondence from the Department dated 27 November regarding the publication of the Noise Complaint Statistics for Northern Ireland 2024/25 Report.
- Memo dated 28 November from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance on the October position on the 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn.
- Memo dated 28 November from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding the Review of Arms Lengths Bodies.
- Correspondence that the Committee has been copied into between the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee and Defra dated 26 November regarding Veterinary Medicine Supply in Northern Ireland following the expiry of the current grace period after 31 December.
- Correspondence the Committee has been copied into from Aquaculture NI to DAERA dated 26 November regarding Industry Concerns Regarding DAERA governance on Invasive non-native species (INNS).
- Correspondence from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC): An invitation to attend the launch of its new independent research report titled 'Windsor Framework Article 2: Enforcement and Remedies' on

Tuesday 16 December and the NIHRC E-Newsletter November 2025 including an invitation to its Annual Human Rights Statement Launch on 8 December

- An invitation from Outscape to its Shaping Green and Blue Spaces conference on 5 March 2026 at Edenmore Golf and Country Club, Magheralin
- Correspondence from Farmers for Action dated 1 November requesting to engage with the Committee to discuss its concerns regarding the Climate Action Programme.
- Correspondence the Committee has been copied into dated 2 December from Defra to HoL NI Scrutiny Committee in relation to its support for the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs Cats and Ferrets) Bill.

## **12. Any Other Business**

There was no other business

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

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 11 December at Room 21, Parliament Buildings at 10.00am.

***The meeting was adjourned at 12:07pm***

**Signature:** .....

**Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson**

**Dated** .....