



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

10 August 2026

Meeting location: Room 21 Parliament Buildings

Present: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
Aoife Finnegan MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Áine Murphy MLA

Via Zoom: Daniel McCrossan 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 Committee agreed to open up the back benches of the Senate as extra public gallery to facilitate the large number of members of the public who wished to attend.

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:21am

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.

The Committee agreed to move to Agenda item 4

4. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to Minister's written statement dated 6 July outlining the current position on:

- Reviewing and reforming existing dog breeding regulations;
- Progress on the Animal Welfare Pathway; and
- The Revised Way Forward for Sale and Supply of Puppies and Kittens in Northern Ireland (Lucy's Law).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from NIPSA, dated 28 July, regarding what it described as an DAERA Escalation of the Veterinary Pay Dispute.

The Committee noted it had an evidence session with NIPSA on 11 June and then on 2 July it considered a response from the Department to matters raised and agreed to keep a watching brief on the dispute.

The Committee noted that NIPSA stated that correspondence issued to NIPSA by the Department on 22 July threatened to impose pay deductions of 25% on employees participating in lawful industrial action short of strike action and that NIPSA has advised that in response it has issued a Pre-Action Protocol Letter challenging the proposed deductions.

The Committee noted the Chair's response to NIPSA encouraging all parties to keep lines of communication open and to engage constructively in any opportunities for dialogue, including through The Labour Relations Agency where appropriate.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to a memo from the Clerk to Committee for Justice regarding correspondence from Countryside Alliance Ireland it had considered at its meeting on 2 July, requesting that the Justice Committee address a number of concerns regarding the Hunting with Dogs Bill.

The Committee noted the Justice Committee has recommended that the AERA Committee may wish to engage with relevant organisations within the justice sector on the matters raised.

The Committee noted it has invited the PSNI to give oral evidence but as yet no response has been received and that neither the PPS and DOJ have responded as yet to the citizen space survey.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite DoJ Officials and/or the PPS to give evidence.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence it has been copied into from the Causeway Coast Dog Rescue, dated 29 July, requesting that the Department investigate Animal Welfare concerns regarding a number of animals at the Revv It Up Festival, in Dungiven on 19 July.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking an update on its actions.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a response, dated 28 July, from the Department in response to its letter of 26 June regarding the Shaping Sustainable Places Programme (SSP) and Allocation of DAERA Contribution of £50m.

The Committee noted that the Department states that lessons from the COVID Recovery Small Settlements Regeneration Programme have been applied in developing the SSP and that its funding contribution will exclusively support regeneration activity in settlements with populations of 5,000 or less.

The Committee noted the Department intends to provide a further written update on the SSP following the summer recess.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response, dated 2 July, from the Department regarding concerns on non-stun halal/kosher slaughter and animal welfare in reply to the letter the Committee forwarded to DAERA from an individual on the matter.

The Committee noted the response states that there is no non-stunned slaughter taking place in Northern Ireland. However, under Schedule 3 of the Welfare at the Time of Killing (Northern Ireland) Regulations 2014 it is permissible for religious reasons, under supervision from an Official DAERA Vet in an approved slaughterhouse.

The Committee also noted there are currently no regulations in Northern Ireland, Great Britain or Europe that require the method of stunning to be identified through the labelling of product and retailers and restaurants are free to buy products where non-stunned slaughter may take place.

The Department also states that it has no role and no legal vires to regulate the import or usage of such products.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the Department's response to the individual who raised the matter.

The Chair addressed the public gallery and reminded those in attendance of the gallery rules.

Minister Muir and the Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:31am

3. Ministerial Evidence Session - Update on DAERA cattle cull operation in County Tyrone.

This item was recorded by Hansard

In addition to the Minister, the following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Gemma Daly, Deputy Chief Veterinary Officer Enzootic Disease Control & Field Delivery; and
- Elsie McGarvey, Senior Principal Veterinary Officer

In response to Members' concerns that the Permanent Secretary and the Chief Veterinary Officer were not in attendance the Minister stated that those Officials present have the most relevant experience and knowledge of the operation.

The Minister thanked the Committee for the opportunity to brief the Committee and stated that he is aware that the matter is of great public interest and concern and has had an impact on DAERA staff, local farmers and the wider public.

The Minister also expressed concern at the online misinformation and the abuse that he and DAERA officials have experienced.

Members condemned the abuse that had been directed at the Minister and Officials.

The Committee were then given an overview and background to the prosecution and events leading up to the cull operation; the operation itself and its aftermath including the subsequent removal of the carcasses.

The Minister advised that the operation would now be subject to an external review but it had not yet been confirmed who would lead the review and what the terms of reference would be.

The Minister stated that the Committee would be notified of the details as soon as possible and he would be content to come back to brief the Committee further when the review was complete.

The Committee heard that Officials had been dealing with the farmer concerned regarding animal welfare issues over a number of years and established that there were no suitable secure facilities on site to gathering up the animals and it was assessed too difficult and unsafe for staff to do so as the cows were semi feral and there were issues regarding the terrain. The Officials assessment was that culling on site was the safest and most humane way to carry out the deprivation order.

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

- When the Minister was made aware of the deprivation order and the cull operation;
- Details of the court order and if the Department had any discretion in the timing of its execution;
- What alternatives to culling were considered by Officials;
- The level of training of the Humane Slaughter team and compliance with the requirements of rules relating to the discharge of firearms in public;
- The impact of the protracted judicial process on the welfare of the animals;
- Queries regarding concerns of the dangers to Officials attempting to handle the animals, considering that some had relatively recently been subject to TB testing;
- The impact of the handling of the operation on the local and wider farming communities.

The Chair thanked the Minister and the Officials for their attendance.

The Minister and the Officials left the meeting at 12:55pm

The Committee discussed the options available to it regarding its input and influence on the external review and the wider impact on animal welfare due to the length of the legal process.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward to the Department any correspondence submitted to the Committee from individuals outlining their concerns.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that its first step would be to write to the Minister to seek clarification when it could expect to receive the terms of reference of the proposed external review; details of the anticipated timeline for the review, including when it is expected to commence, the work that it will involve, and the expected timeframe for its completion.

Gareth Wilson MLA left the meeting at 1:08pm

The Committee returned to Agenda item 5

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 28 July, from the Minister regarding the publication of the Department's response to the Office for Environmental Protection's (OEP) review of the implementation of the Nutrients Action Programme Regulations (2019).

The Committee noted the response addresses the 12 recommendations made by the OEP on Implementation and Compliance; Sufficiency of Technical Provisions; and Overall Environmental Outcomes.

The Committee noted the consultation on the NAP 2027-2030 proposals will conclude on 7 September and it will receive a further briefing on its responses from Officials in due course.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response, dated 20 July, from the Chief Minister of the Isle of Man government regarding the impact of Isle of Man access restrictions on the Northern Ireland Fishing industry.

The Committee noted it wrote to the IOM government following evidence taken on 25 June from the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation (NIFPO) and the Northern Ireland Fishermen's Federation (NIFF) on the impact on the fishing industry of the increasing spatial squeeze due to the restrictions.

The Committee noted the response highlighted that the 2023 Memorandum of Understanding agreed between the four Fisheries Policy Authorities of the United Kingdom and the Isle of Man provides clarity on fisheries management arrangements and The IOM government welcomes greater communication on fishing matters looks forward to sharing knowledge regarding fishing management measures for the MPAs.

The Committee also noted that the response stated that fisheries management and immigration control are separate matters and that all persons seeking to work within the territory of the Isle of Man are compliant with relevant immigration legislation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to share the response to the ANIFPO; NIFPO and NIFF

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence and return to the matter to agree a substantive response at the next meeting.

The Committee considered the summary report of the feedback survey for the AD Stakeholder Event held on 4 June.

The Committee also considered correspondence dated 10 July from the RSPB providing its Feedback and suggestions on the AD Stakeholder Event.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note for future event planning.

7. Correspondence

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

The Committee considered the following Annual Reports and Accounts that have been laid in the Business Office:

- The Northern Ireland Environment Agency - Annual Report and Accounts 2025-26;
- The Agri-food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) 2025/26 Annual Report and Accounts;

- The Forest Service - Annual Report and Accounts 2025-26;
- Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board's (AHDB) Annual Report and Accounts (ARA) for the year ending 31 March 2026; and
- The Department of Finance's Annual Report and Accounts 2025-26.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence, dated 6 July, from the Department regarding the Approval of Round 4 Rail Northern Ireland Transport Holding Company (Translink) Noise Action Plan

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence dated 7 July from the Department regarding Round 1 of the Sustainable Farming Investment Scheme (SFIS), which opened on 21 July and is due to close on 1 September.

Agreed: The Committee agreed write to the Department and ask why Anaerobic Digestion equipment was not included.

Correspondence from the Department dated 29 July regarding the proposed launch of the 12 week Consultation on the draft Irish Sea Pelagic and Demersal Fisheries Management Plans (FMP).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence, dated 28 July, from the Department regarding the Publication of the Inland Fisheries Annual Report 2025 and a copy of the Report which the Department intends to publish on the DAERA website.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence, dated 9 July, from the Department regarding the launch on 20 July of the nine week Consultation on Environmental Compensatory Measures for Offshore Wind in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence dated 1 July from the Department regarding the Publication of Guidance on the Making of Byelaws; and Draft Guidance on the Use of Fixed

Monetary Penalties in Marine Protected Areas to support the implementation of the Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland,

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 2 July from the Committee for the Economy seeking the views of all Assembly Statutory Committees before 14 October regarding the Renewable Electricity Generation Bill Call for Evidence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the Economy Committee suggesting it gives consideration to ensuring the scheme delivers renewable energy targets in a way that protects agricultural land, enhances biodiversity, benefits rural communities, and avoids unintended environmental consequences.

A memo dated 8 July from the Committee for Justice seeking the views of all Assembly Statutory Committees before 25 September regarding the Victims and Witnesses of Crime Bill Call for Evidence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the Committee for Justice to suggest it explores whether the proposed Commissioner for Victims and Witnesses of Crime will collect and analyse data in a way that identifies rural victims' experiences, and whether victim services are sufficiently accessible to people living in remote and rural communities.

A memo dated 8 July from the Clerk to the Committee for Communities seeking the views of all Assembly Statutory Committees before 18 September regarding the Housing (Amendment) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to submit a Nil response.

A memo dated 9 July from the Clerk to the Committee for Communities seeking the views of all Assembly Statutory Committees before 25 September regarding The Conversion Practices (Criminalisation) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to submit a Nil response.

A memo dated 3 July from the Clerk to the Committee for Communities seeking the views of all Assembly Statutory Committees before 25 September regarding Charities (Amendment) Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to submit a Nil response.

A memo dated 9 July from the Clerk to Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (DSC) regarding EU Regulation on the production and marketing of forest reproductive material.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Items of correspondence that the Committee has been copied into between the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee and Defra regarding:

- Amending Council Directives regarding various foods for human consumption;
- Simplification and Strengthening of Food and Feed Safety;
- Marketing of Plant-Forest Reproductive Material;
- Control of Certain Listed Diseases; and
- Composite Products Exempted from Official Controls.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) - Heating Oil Market Study - Final Report

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

An Invitation to the Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF) Sea Across Society Launch Event in the Long Gallery on Tuesday 3rd November from 2pm to 5pm.

Agreed: Members agreed to respond individually.

Notification of the NI Fiscal Council Annual Conference taking place at PwC Merchant Square, Belfast on 25 September.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Youth Assembly Monthly Update for June 2026

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A series of emails the Committee has been copied into from an Individual regarding Odour complaints emanating from Natural World Products at Glen Road Belfast.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

8. Any Other Business

None

9. Date and Time of Next Meeting

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

The meeting was adjourned at 1:20pm

Signature:

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated