



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

5 June 2025

Parliament Buildings, Room 21

Present: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
William Irwin MLA
Patsy McGlone MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA

Via Zoom: Áine Murphy MLA
Aoife Finnegan MLA

Apologies: None

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 10:06 am

The Deputy Chair advised the Committee that the Chair had a commitment this morning and he would be chairing the meeting until he arrived.

1. Apologies

None

2. Declaration of Interests

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

None were declared.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Deputy Chair referred to correspondence, dated 28 May, from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council regarding research and data-analysis

The Committee noted that the Council has a Rural Affairs Sub Committee, which progresses research and data-analysis relating to its District and have offered to present the findings of the research to the Committee.

The Committee noted there had been an evidence session with the Agricultural Liaison Group of the Council at the meeting of the 3 April.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a written briefing in the first instance from the Rural Affairs Sub Committee on its research.

The Deputy Chair referred to correspondence, dated 2 June, from the Assembly and Executive Review Committee (AERC) regarding its call for evidence and it has invited Committees to provide views and experience of scrutiny of cross-cutting legislation by 30 September.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request the Committee team to research relevant Bill work undertaken by the Committee in the last mandate and will then consider a draft response to AERC in September.

The Deputy Chair advised that the Committee has been copied into from the Warrenpoint Community Association (WCA) to the Newry, Mourne and Down District Council and the NIEA, regarding a formal complaint and objection concerning allegations of breaches of planning control at a site near Carnbane Business Park, Newry.

The Committee noted it considered correspondence from WCA at its meeting on 1 May raising concerns regarding what WCA believes to be multiple significant breaches of waste management regulations at the Warrenpoint Harbour Authority.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Deputy Chair referred to the Oxford Research Project titled The Combined Effects of Treated Sewage Discharge and Land Use on Rivers, highlighted by a Member during the briefing by the Office of Environmental Protection (OEP) at the meeting of 29 May. The report was, in fact, based on four rivers in England.

The Committee noted that the report was forwarded to Members and to the OEP for their reference.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the report.

The Deputy Chair referred to the joint concurrent meeting with the Committee for Infrastructure on 3 June 2025 when it heard from DAERA, the UFU and from a farmer with lived experience of the issues facing farmers during the A5 Western Transport Corridor Scheme.

The Committee noted the meeting was useful and the UFU are to provide examples of cases where there had been poor communication with farmers and information gaps in advice from the Department that farmers required.

The Committee noted the Infrastructure Committee discussed the concurrent meeting at its meeting on 4 June and agreed to write to DfI to ask about considerations in relation to other buildings in the path of the A5 and the impact of the road on farm practices.

Some Committee Members were keen to ascertain if DAERA would allow leeway in Single Farm Payment applications due to potential confusion around the amount of land still being farmed, as inexact fencing of some areas of vested land may lead to slight errors in calculation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask what is the anticipated impact on the Single Farm Payment of slight errors in calculation of the land that is allowed to be farmed after vesting and what is the accepted tolerance, and did it consider advising farmers of the exact area of vested land to avoid errors in individual calculations.

The Deputy Chair referred to an informal meeting on 3 June with Chair, him, and the Minister to discuss the NAP consultation. The Deputy Chair gave the Committee a brief overview of the meeting which covered a range of issues that the Minister then highlighted that day in oral questions.

The Deputy Chair stated he advised the Minister that a pre-consultation with the sector should have taken place before the proposals were announced and that it was a case of putting the cart before the horse. The matter of moving forward with proposals before the full scientific evidence was in place was also raised.

The Committee noted that a clerks memo providing a summary of the meeting will be provided to Members in due course.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the meeting.

The Deputy Chair referred to a draft of a letter from the Committee to Farmers for Action (FFA) covering the detail of its work on the matter and a summary of its restricted legal advice. This is the conclusion of its due diligence on the proposed draft Farm Welfare Bill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to issue the letter.

4. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting on 29 May were agreed and signed by the Chair to be published.

Agreed: The Minutes were agreed.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a response, dated 30 May, from the Department of Communities (DfC) regarding Northern Ireland Shows Association (NISA).

The Committee noted the response states that DfC has no record of receiving correspondence from NISA on its Independent Resilience Review of Agriculture Shows in Northern Ireland Report and that DfC has no funding streams that NISA could avail of at this time.

Agreed. The Committee agreed to advise NISA to send the report to DfC.

The Departmental officials joined the meeting at 10:19am

6. Departmental oral evidence session - 2025-26 Main Estimates and June Monitoring Round Proposals

The Committee noted the Chair spoke on behalf of the Committee on the Supply Resolution for the Main Estimates 2025/26 in the Assembly on 3 June.

The following officials briefed the Committee:

- Roger Downey – Finance Director
- Nuala Hennessy – In Year Financial Planning Branch
- Helen Mullan – In Year Financial Planning Branch

The Committee was briefed on the outcome of DAERA's internal consideration of the main estimates and the June Monitoring Round and details of the return due to the Department of Finance on 5 June.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard that the TB compensation projection is £47.4 million for 2025/2026 compared to £43.1m from the previous year. The Committee also heard that the final expenditure for the whole TB programme is expected to rise from £60m in 2024/ 2025 to over £65m by the end of this financial year.

The Deputy Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The Officials left the meeting at 10:28 pm

The Committee then agreed to move to Agenda Item 9 and return to Agenda item 7 later in the meeting.

9. Correspondence.

The Committee considered the Correspondence memo.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the memo.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 28 May, from Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF) regarding the Outer Belfast Lough Marine Conservation Zone. The Committee noted that despite fishing in the area not being permitted since 2023, anchorage of commercial vessels still occurs resulting in damage to the site and are calling for urgent action by the Department.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department for comment.

The Committee considered correspondence from The Executive Office, dated 22 May regarding the Period Products (Free provision) Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the report.

The Committee considered the memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance, dated 29 May, regarding Analysis of 2024-25 Outturn and Forecast Outturn.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the memo.

The Committee noted on 22 May it considered a request from FFA seeking a formal meeting regarding the NAP proposals and Bovine TB. The Committee agreed to request that they submit a written paper in the first instance regarding the issues. The Committee considered the response from the Farmers for Action (FFA) dated 29 May.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the FFA to its proposed engagement event on the NAP proposals.

The Committee considered an invitation from The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) to the launch of its new independent research report 'The Environment, Human Rights and the Windsor Framework' on Tuesday 24 June, at the Europa Hotel, Belfast.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the invitation.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 30 May, regarding the Public Consultation on the draft Third Northern Ireland Climate Change Adaptation Programme (NICCAP3) - to launch on Monday 9 June for 8 weeks until 4 August. Officials will provide a briefing following the analysis of the responses.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered a Clerk's Memo from the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (DSC), dated 30 May, regarding the Proposed EU Regulation strengthening the position of farmers in the food supply chain and a copy of the quarterly status update RalSe briefing note in relation to the progress of the proposed EU act.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the memo and the RalSe briefing.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 30 May, regarding the Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework Action Plan published on 14 May. It proposes a new strategic cross-cutting approach to food to ensure coherence across food policies that help to improve economic, environmental, health and social outcomes for Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the Action Plan.

The Committee considered correspondence, from Northern Ireland Mushroom Growers Association (NIMGA) to the leaders of the political parties calling for the continuation of current spending levels under the Fruit and Vegetable Aid Scheme (FVAS) to be reflected in the Agriculture Bill.

The Committee noted the Consideration Stage of the Agriculture Bill is on 9 June.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

10. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to visit Blackiston Houston Estates to see a SULS project in action, after the meeting on 26 June.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to visit the CAFRE Hill Farm at Glenwherry in the Antrim Hills, on 3 July, to see the work of the Irish Grouse Conservation Trust.

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

11. Any Other Business

None

The meeting was suspended at 10:35am as witnesses for Agenda Item 7 were not available.

The meeting resumed at 10:51am

The Chair joined the meeting at 10:51am

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:51am

Aoife Finnegan joined the meeting by zoom at 11:05am

The Chair returned to Agenda item 7

7. Departmental oral evidence session - Horticulture Pilot Scheme 1,2 and 3 (Policy Briefing and SL1)

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted the policy briefing would be on the Horticulture Pilot Scheme and on the SL1 The Horticulture Pilot Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

The following DAERA Officials briefed the Committee:

- Paul McHenry, Acting Director of CAFRE
- Dr Eric Long, Head of CAFRE's Education Service
- David Dowd, Acting Head of CAFRE's Horticulture Branch

The Committee heard that the Department intends to make an SR, to be laid before the Assembly under the negative resolution procedure, providing it with the legal powers to implement the Horticulture Pilot Scheme as part of the roll out of the Sustainable Agriculture Programme.

The Committee heard that the overarching aim of the scheme is to determine the feasibility of a full horticulture scheme to increase the output of the Northern Ireland commercial horticulture industry

The Committee were briefed on the three Pilot Schemes 1: Sustainable Sector; 2: Innovation Driver and Support; and 3: Growers' Training and Support.

The Committee heard that the horticulture industry in Northern Ireland is fragmented with limited cooperation between growers and there is limited data available on the number and scale of businesses and the costs and returns on production.

One aim is to de-risk investment and innovation and participants will have access to specialist knowledge and dedicated support to assist growers in growing existing markets and securing new markets.

There then followed a question and answer session.

Concern was expressed regarding the criteria that Commercial Horticulture businesses must be a DAERA Category 1 or Category 2 Farm Business, and this will disadvantage smaller growers.

The Committee also queried the need for the Level 2 Certificate in Practical Horticulture Skills. DAERA advised that it was important that participants, especially new entrants, had a basic level of horticultural knowledge and CAFRE would be running the course.

Concern was expressed that a small number of larger growers could potentially swallow up the funding allocated leaving limited funds available for smaller growers.

The Committee heard that there will be an ongoing evaluation of the pilot scheme to develop a final scheme. It was proposed that the evaluation should consider crisis support.

The Chair thanked Officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Department proceeds to make the SR, and the Committee will consider it and the ESR Report in due course.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11:48am

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11:48am

8. SL1 The Agriculture (Student Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

The following DAERA Officials briefed the Committee:

- Mark McLean - Chief Agricultural Economist, Policy Economics and Statistics Division (PESD); and
- Chloe Robinson Deputy Principal, Policy Development Branch (PDB)

The Committee heard that the Department intends to make a Statutory Rule to amend the Agriculture (Student Fees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 which sets the level of fees payable for undergraduate and postgraduate higher education courses delivered by DAERA, at CAFRE.

The Committee heard the SR will be laid before the Assembly under the negative resolution procedure and subject to Executive approval it is anticipated that it will come into operation on 1st September 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Department proceeds to make the SR, and the Committee will consider it and the ESR Report in due course.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11:55am

14. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on Thursday 12th June at 10.00am in Castle Archdale, County Fermanagh.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:55am

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated