



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

**Minutes of Proceedings**

**27 June 2024**

**Nautilus Centre, Kilkeel**

**Present:** Tom Elliott MLA (Chairperson)  
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
John Blair MLA  
Nicola Brogan MLA  
Patsy McGlone MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

None

**Apologies:**

Tom Buchanan MLA  
William Irwin MLA  
Áine Murphy MLA

**In Attendance:** Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk  
Mrs Gillian Barker, Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Mr Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor

Mr Damien Brown, Clerical Officer

***The Meeting Opened in Public Session at 10.16 am***

*The Chair reminded Members of the ‘Declaration of Interests’ and asked if there are any new interests to declare, relevant to the items under consideration at this meeting, that had not already been declared at the first meeting.*

*The meeting opened with 4 members, there was then a quorum of 5 when Mr John Blair MLA joined the meeting at 10.29 am.*

**1. Apologies**

Tom Buchanan MLA

William Irwin MLA

Áine Murphy MLA

**5. Oral Briefing from Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation (ANIFPO) & The Northern Ireland Fish Producers’ Organisation Ltd (NIFPO) - Update on issues impacting the sector**

The Committee noted the following briefing papers:

- Extract from RaISe Briefing Paper - “Potential Issues for the AERA Committee” dated 15 December 2023, Section 8 (Marine Fisheries); and
- Background Paper from Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation [ANIFPO] and Northern Ireland Fish Producers Organisation [NIFPO]

The Chair welcomed the following representatives of the Fish Producers to the meeting:

- Brian Chambers, Chair, Anglo-North Irish Fish Producers Organisation;

- Trevor McKee, Chair of Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation; and
- Harry Wick, CEO Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation.

The representatives briefed the Committee and there then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee considered their concerns - the need for seasonal working visas; financial support for automation on trawlers; the positioning of wind turbines regarding environmental and sustainability consequences; and better ways of managing species rather than managing distance from shore boundaries.

The Committee thanked the Mr Chambers, Mr McKee and Mr Wick for their presentations.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed, that on their behalf, they will raise these matters with the Department to help move the matters forward.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to ask the Department for numbers / weight over the past 20 years of fish catches by species, in the Irish Sea Pelagic (ii) Irish Sea Demersal and (iii) NI Inshore areas

***Mr Patsy McGlone MLA joined the meeting at 10.42 am***

***The Officials left the meeting at 11.17 am***

#### **4. Chairperson's Business**

The Chair sought the Committee's agreement on a number of arrangements during recess:

##### **Freedom of Information:**

The Chair advised Members it is standard practice to delegate authority to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, during periods of recess, to submit views on the releasing or withholding of information in any non-routine or contentious Freedom of Information requests received by the Committee; and that any such

views expressed would be brought to the attention of the committee at the first meeting after summer recess.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to delegate that authority to the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson.

Correspondence:

The Chair advised Members that the committee team will continue to receive correspondence from stakeholders over the summer period. It is standard practice that such items are included for consideration at the Committee's first meeting of the new session in September 2024.

Members noted that any urgent matters may be considered by correspondence as needed and such actions will be included in the MoPs of the next formal meeting of the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that during the summer months the Committee may agree, via correspondence, to write to the Department seeking clarity on any urgent issues.

Forward Work Programme:

The Chair advised Members the FWP will be revisited after summer recess.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the last meeting until after the summer recess, will be Monday 8 July, unless urgent matters arise. After recess, the Committee will have a new draft forward work programme to consider.

Minutes of Proceedings:

The Chair advised Members the MoPs of the last meeting before recess will be signed off at the next formal meeting of the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted at last week's meeting the first meeting will be Thursday 12 September 2024.

End of Session Reports:

The Chair advised Members that historically, at the end of each session in a mandate, each committee produces an End of Session Report. However, given that this session has been short, the Chairpersons' Liaison Group (CLG) agreed that End of Session reports are not required for the Feb – July 2024 session.

The Chair advised the Committee will produce an End of Session report in September 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the decision of the CLG.

The Chair advised Members that he has received an invitation dated 20 June 2024, from the Managing Director of Re-Gen Waste, Newry. This is a second invitation the Committee has received and also a request to brief to the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to add a visit to Re-Gen Waste to the draft FWP and in the interim to ask Mr Doherty to submit a written briefing.

### **3. Minutes**

Minutes of 20 June 2024 were signed and agreed to be published.

### **4. Matters Arising**

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 19 June 2024, in reply to its letter of 31 May 2024, regarding clarity around certification requirements for pets travelling in consignments of less than five to a show.

The Committee noted the response outlines requirements for a non-commercial movement, under the Pet Travel Scheme, of a Great Britain (GB) pet travelling to Northern Ireland (NI) or a pet returning to NI from GB with its owner include an EU Animal Health Certificate or EU Pet Passport, a microchip, a rabies vaccination and tapeworm treatment. In addition, there is a limit of five pets per person travelling under the Pet Travel Scheme.

The Committee noted the Department has undertaken a review of the DAERA Pet Travel Website with updates made to provide further clarity on the certification requirements for pets travelling to shows.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the response.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 20 June 2024, in reply to its letter of 7 June 2024, regarding level of engagement the Department has had with the Northern Ireland Fish Producers' Organisation (NIFPO) and/or Tidal Vision on the matter of proposed solutions to tackle lake pollution specifically Lough Neagh.

The Committee noted the Department has stated that a Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) is planned which will provide an opportunity for industry-led trials to develop and demonstrate proof of concept. Officials have advised NIFPO/Tidal Vision of this potential route.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the response and that the Department should advise all such interested organisations who have approached Committee of the SBRI opportunity.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 25 June 2024, in reply to its letter of 14 June 2024 regarding its request for information on two points following an update on progress with ammonia related planning consultations from NIEA:

- i. Clarity on the cessation of prior Ammonia Standing Advice without Ministerial approval and if the Department would have been obligated to undertake a consultation on this matter had a Minister been in post; and
- ii. Confirmation from the Department if it has allocated funding for research to look at new technologies that could reduce Ammonia emissions.

The response stated that the decision regarding 'cessation' was taken on 19 December 2023 by a senior officer of the Department under the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation) Act 2022, after careful consideration and in response to a potential legal challenge by the Office of Environmental Protection. This decision was approved by the Permanent Secretary following provision of legal advice.

The Committee noted the Department is not able to comment on whether it would have been obligated to undertake a consultation on this matter had a Minister been in post, as this would have been a decision for any Minister.

The Committee noted that research is ongoing through a DAERA commissioned research programme to inform policy on ammonia emissions, funding research in AFBI on a range of new technologies.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted both of these responses.

The Committee considered a notification from the Department, dated 25 June 2024, to advise the Committee that under Animal Health and Welfare Policy, a Commencement Order is being made to bring into force the Northern Ireland dog and cat abduction offences within the Pet Abduction Act 2024 on 24 August 2024.

The Committee noted AERA Committee Legislative Consent Motion [LCM] report was laid in the Assembly on 10 May 2024 and the LCM reported was approved by the Assembly.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the Commencement Order.

The Committee considered correspondence from Rod Cappell, facilitator of Aquaculture Representative Group, which included a copy of his letter to the Minister dated 26 February and the Minister's reply dated 7 March, regarding briefing the Committee on the concerns of the aquaculture industry.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to add this matter to the FWP and to write to Mr Cappell to submit a written briefing in the interim.

***The Department Officials joined the meeting at 11.26 am***

## **6. Oral Briefing from The Department of Agriculture, Environment & Rural Affairs – on Fisheries Management Plans (i) Irish Sea Pelagic (ii) Irish Sea Demersal (iii) NI Inshore**

The Committee considered the briefing paper from the Department regarding the three draft Fisheries Management Plans (FMPs) in advance of DAERA commencing the consultation and publication process.

The Chair welcomed the following Officials to the meeting:

- Colin Armstrong, Deputy Director, Marine and Fisheries Division;
- Fiona Taylor, Head of Sea Fisheries Policy and Grants Branch: and
- Patrick Smith, Policy Lead, Northern Ireland Inshore FM

The Officials briefed the Committee and there then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee raised concerns regarding the FMPs if they reflect the concerns of the Fisheries Sector.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward concerns raised by NIFPO & ANIFPO at today's oral briefing. A Clerk's paper will be presented to the Committee at next week's meeting for consideration of the issues.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their briefing.

***The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11.57 am***

## **7. Departmental Written Briefing - Inter-tidal hand gathering of Shellfish (consultation of responses)**

The Committee received a written briefing from the Department regarding Inter-tidal hand gathering of Shellfish (responses to the consultation).

### **Background to the consultation:**

Section 42 of the Belfast Corporation Act 1930 prohibits all shellfish gathering along the shores of Belfast Lough. Elsewhere in Northern Ireland, intertidal hand gathering of shellfish is currently unregulated.

In 2022, the Department consulted on proposals designed to reduce the impact of intertidal hand-gathering of shellfish on Northern Ireland's intertidal shoreline and to help ensure future sustainability. The aim of the proposals is to deal with the following issues:



- Increasing levels of intertidal hand-gathering of shellfish will result in a corresponding increase in risk of damage to the intertidal environment and threatens the long-term sustainability of the fishery; and
- Need to protect sensitive habitats such as seagrass and mudflats from the large-scale removal of a food source for dependent species and to protect any marine species which may be sensitive to disturbance.

**Next Steps:**

The Inshore Fisheries Management Plan has established working stakeholder groups. The Department will consider further the findings from this consultation within the framework of the Northern Ireland Inshore FMP.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the written briefing.

## **8. Departmental Written Briefing - Implementation of the Climate Change Act 2022**

The Committee received a written briefing from the Department - an update on the steps DAERA has taken so far to implement the Climate Change Act (NI) 2022. This is the current position on implementation of the Act; the proposed next steps; and intent for an oral briefing with the AERA Committee in the Autumn.

The Chair reminded the Committee of some of the main elements of the Act, including:

- A statutory 2050 net zero greenhouse gas emissions reduction target along with interim 'must achieve' targets of at least 48% by 2030, and a 2040 target (to be set through secondary legislation); and
- Requirements for setting 5-year carbon budgets to cap emissions.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that Officials will liaise with the Clerk to arrange a suitable date for an oral briefing in the autumn.

## **9. Departmental Written Briefing - Consultation on a Review of Marine Licence Fees**

The Committee received a written briefing from the Department regarding 'Proposed Amendments to Marine Licensing Fees'. The Committee noted the Department anticipates the consultation on these largely technical proposals will issue on 9th July and close on 3rd September 2024. The timing of the consultation is to align with DoF timescales for introducing the Financial Provisions Bill.

The Committee considered that currently the Department is undertaking a review of marine licensing fees of which the Committee was previously advised via a written briefing at its meeting of 16 May 2024. The review considered options to increase fee income using both existing and potential new powers.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted this substantial briefing and the embargo on this information not to be released prior to 9 July 2024.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted it will be advised of responses to the consultation, receive a copy of an SL1 in respect of amendments to the Marine Licensing (Application Fees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2011 and will be briefed at appropriate stages of the Financial Provisions Bill, should it include marine licensing clauses.

## **10. Departmental Written Briefing – UK Policy Framework on Management of Radioactive Substances and Nuclear Decommissioning**

The Committee received a written briefing from the Department regarding the UK Policy Framework on management of radioactive substances and nuclear decommissioning. The substantial briefing included:

Annex A: 'Managing radioactive substances and nuclear decommissioning policy consultation – Government response; and

Annex B: 'UK policy framework for managing radioactive substances and nuclear decommissioning'.

The Committee noted that Northern Ireland has no nuclear facilities, no higher activity radioactive waste that would require these types of disposal facilities and there are no plans to site a Geological Disposal Facility (GDF) or near surface facility here.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write the Department to have sight of its consultation response forwarded to DEFRA on this matter.

## 11. Correspondence

The Committee considered correspondence from Mr Young from NI Technology Centre, QUB, Centre for Competitiveness. He is seeking an opportunity to present to Committee an update on a private sector led project in NI agriculture. It aims to address blue-green algae issues with a number of additional benefits in recovering assets in terms of air and water quality, whilst creating a circular economy where animal waste is processed to provide Biomethane gas and other value streams.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department for their consideration for potential Lough Neagh solutions; and to request a written briefing as it also includes circular economy elements.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 19 June 2024, regarding Sea Fish Industry Authority (Seafish) Levy Review. The Committee noted that Seafish has advised the Minister it is currently carrying out a formal statutory consultation from 13 May 2024 for 12 weeks on proposed changes to the levy rates and a cap on their annual inflationary increases.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 18th June 2024, that Patsy McGlone MLA received from an individual - 'Treatment of Earth Cancer – Producing High Efficiency Feed Protein from Blue Green Algae.' This is a Feasibility Report prepared by a Biotechnology Company and a Life Sciences Research Institute from China.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the Feasibility Report to the Department.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 21<sup>st</sup> June 2024, from Peter McCallion, Clerk to the Committee for the Economy regarding a response that its Committee considered at their meeting of 19<sup>th</sup> June, from the Strategic Investment Board in respect of the ISNI Investing Activity monthly reports.

There is a recently established NICS Board subgroup - the ISNI Committee - which is to focus on system-wide change and improvement in the delivery of major capital projects, including the establishment of a project to review the processes for data collection and reporting.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence from Development Trusts NI requesting an opportunity to present a research paper to the Committee regarding 'Rural Assets: Policy and Practice Insights from the Devolved Nations'.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to add this to the autumn Forward Work Programme.

## **12. Draft Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered the draft Press Release regarding the visit to the Nautilus Centre, Kilkeel.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the draft Press Release.

The Committee noted the current Forward Work Programme and an early autumn Forward Work Programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the Forward Work Programmes.

The Committee considered the process required for external visits. The Chair read through the process as follows:

- The visit is proposed in the draft Forward Work Programme;
- The visit is considered by the Committee at its meeting under the FWP Agenda Item;
- The decision is recorded in the relevant minutes, which then authorises the Committee team to organise the visit and incur any expenditure; and
- If a visit is going to incur expenses over £500 a Business Case is prepared by the Committee Team for approval from Assembly Senior Management.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the process regarding external visits.

### **13. Any Other Business**

None

### **14. Date, Time and Place of next meeting**

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on Tuesday 2 July 2024, at 9.30 am in Room 29, Parliament Buildings.

***The Meeting adjourned at 12.11 pm***

**Signature:** .....

**Tom Elliott, Chairperson**

**Dated .....**