For the attention of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs
***C/O Glenda Doherty*, Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs**
Northern Ireland Assembly

NILGA Response: Call for Evidence – Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill

September 2026

Introduction

NILGA welcomes the opportunity to provide written evidence to the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs on the Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill. NILGA understands that the Bill seeks to modernise Northern Ireland's fisheries, aquaculture and water environment policy framework, including through updated enforcement powers, aquaculture licensing and a more sustainable, ecosystem-based approach.

NILGA understands that the Bill's main duties, powers and enforcement responsibilities sit with DAERA and that it does not appear to transfer new statutory or operational responsibilities to councils. NILGA is therefore not offering detailed clause-by-clause commentary. Instead, this submission provides a strategic local government perspective, focused on the practical points where implementation may intersect with councils' wider place-shaping, environmental wellbeing, planning, local economic development, tourism and community-facing roles.

NILGA's principal concern is that implementation provides clear accountability, proportionate engagement with councils and practical communication routes for elected members, council officers and communities where local issues arise but formal responsibility sits elsewhere.

Potential Implications for Northern Ireland Councils

NILGA considers that the Bill is unlikely to have a direct statutory or operational impact on councils as drafted. Its provisions primarily relate to DAERA's functions in fisheries, inland waters, aquaculture licensing, enforcement and penalties. The following areas therefore identify where councils may have a legitimate strategic interest in implementation, communication and alignment with wider place-based outcomes.

Water Quality and Environmental Protection

Councils have local interests in environmental health, pollution incidents, planning, biodiversity and environmental stewardship. Stronger protections for water quality are welcome, provided responsibilities between DAERA, councils, Northern Ireland Water and other relevant bodies remain clear, and councils are not drawn into unfunded or unclear expectations beyond their statutory remit.

Planning and Development

Some proposals may be relevant to development near rivers, lakes and coastal areas, particularly where water quality, habitat protection or aquaculture activity intersects with local development planning. Councils will need clear guidance on how any new requirements relate to existing planning processes, so that applicants, councils and statutory consultees are not faced with duplication, delay or uncertainty.

Economic Development and Tourism

Healthy fisheries and water environments can support angling tourism, blue-green infrastructure, coastal tourism and rural economic development. Implementation should therefore align with wider place-based, regeneration and sustainability objectives, recognising the role councils play in convening partners and supporting local economic opportunity.

Community and Place-Shaping Role

Councillors are often contacted by residents about pollution, fish kills, water quality and access to waterways. Clear communication routes will be important so local concerns can be directed to the right body quickly and consistently.

NILGA would welcome assurance that, as the Bill progresses, DAERA will provide clear guidance on the operational boundaries between departmental enforcement roles, council functions and other relevant public bodies. This should include practical communication arrangements for issues that are often first raised locally with councillors or council officers, even where formal responsibility sits elsewhere.

Conclusion

NILGA welcomes the Committee's engagement with local government on this Bill and supports its intention to modernise Northern Ireland's fisheries, aquaculture and water environment policy framework. NILGA's view is that councils will have a broader strategic interest in its implementation where it intersects with local place-shaping, environmental wellbeing and community leadership.

NILGA and councils remain committed to working constructively with the Committee, DAERA and relevant partners as the Bill progresses, particularly on any implementation issues that may affect local government interests or community-facing communication.