



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

**Minutes of Proceedings**

**17 February 2025**

**Parliament Buildings, Room 30**

**Present:**

Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)

Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)

John Blair MLA

Tom Buchanan MLA

Michelle McIlveen MLA

Patsy McGlone MLA

Áine Murphy MLA

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

**Apologies:** William Irwin MLA

**In Attendance:**

Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk

Mr Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk

Mr Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor

Miss Sarah Preece Clerical Officer

### ***The Meeting Opened in Public Session at 10.12 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.*

#### **1. Apologies**

William Irwin MLA

#### **2. The Farm Sustainability (Transitional Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025**

The Committee considered the following papers:

- Draft SR - The Farm Sustainability (Transitional Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 (Revised);
- 32<sup>nd</sup> Examiner of Statutory Rules Report (dated 14 February);
- Note of the informal meeting held on 10 February between the Minister between the Chair and the Deputy Chair;
- Letter from the Minister - SR 2025/0000 The Farm Sustainability (transitional Provisions) Regulations (NI) 2025 - Young Farmers Payment and Regional Reserve (dated 12 February);
- Letter to the Department - SR 2025/000 The Farm Sustainability (Transitional Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 (dated 13 February); and
- Response from The Minister - Draft SR 2025/000 The Farm Sustainability (Transitional Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 (dated 14 February).

The Chair advised Members that at the meeting on Thursday 13 February he had read out a summary of the Committee's consideration of the matters to date. The Committee were content that the Chair did not repeat that summary and that the discussion moved immediately to the most recent response from the Minister.

The Committee noted that Examiner of Statutory Rules report, issued on Friday 14th February, confirms that the revised Regulations are not required to be drawn to the special attention of the Assembly under Standing Order 43(6).

The Chair highlighted a number of points from DAERA's response to the urgent queries made after the Committee meeting on 13 February, including:

- The New Entrant category of the Regional Reserve (RR) scheme received, on average, 10 applicants per annum from those that held no entitlements in the year of application and its continuation cannot be justified on a value for money basis;
- The new Farming for the Generations programme includes a component to connect potential new entrants with farm businesses who wish to enter long term lease or other arrangements;
- It is the Department's experience that there are only a small number of new entrants to farming. It will continue to be possible for young farmers and new entrants to commence a new business and obtain entitlements via purchase or lease; and
- The presence or absence of the RR provisions for young farmers and new entrants will make no significant difference to the gap between entitlements and land area available. In addition, if there were significantly more entitlements, they would all have to be reduced in value as the amount of money available to the scheme will not increase.

The Committee noted that the Department also highlighted that if the Regulations are not approved:

- The Farms Sustainability Transition Payment (FSTP) Scheme cannot launch on 3 March 2025 as planned;
- this will delay the opening of Basic Payment Scheme (BPS), and as a result, payments currently scheduled for circa September 2025 may not issue until circa late November 2025; and
- the Regulations also introduce a number of additional changes and policies to enable the continued roll out of the Sustainable Agricultural Payment (SAP) - in 2025 this includes the commencement of the Suckler Cow Scheme, Farming with Nature and new Knowledge Schemes. These Schemes will not commence as planned if the Regulations are not approved.

There then followed a Committee discussion.

Some Members raised the issue of a lack of financial support for new entrants to farming and the possibility that the price of entitlements could rise a result in the future. Also, that the changes proposed would put young farmers at a disadvantage compared to farmers in the Republic of Ireland where a young farmers scheme remains in place.

The majority of Members expressed dissatisfaction that the Department had not taken on board previous concerns raised by the Committee.

There was also concern that the Committee have been put in the difficult position where they felt they had no choice as to further delay the SR would result in the unwelcome consequences as described.

Members expressed the need for sufficient time to exercise their scrutiny role in the future and generally the Committee was not being given the time and space to properly scrutinise the detail. Although the issue was brought to the Committee in May 2024, there had been considerable changes to the policy position since then and the updated SR contained additional detail and policy to that discussed in May.

A Member did express an opinion that there had been ample time to consider the matters as the Committee was first notified of the Department's intention on 23 May 2024. The Member also highlighted that the existing scheme did not seem to provide value for money and had a low take up rate.

Following the discussion, the Chair sought the Committee's view if it could reach a consensus on supporting the draft SR in the plenary debate on 18 February.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that there was no consensus reached and a vote was not taken.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the Chair would cover the variety of issues raised over the past few weeks.

### **3. Any Other Business**

The issues of the recent outbreak of Avian Flu and the pollution incident, which resulted in a significant fish kill on the Glenmornan River in Co Tyrone were raised.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister seeking an urgent oral update regarding the Department's response to the Avian Flu outbreak.

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

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on **Thursday 20 February at 11.00am in Parliament Buildings, Room 21.**

Prior to that, an informal meeting with the Chair of the Migration Advisory Committee will also be held on 20<sup>th</sup> February in Room 106 at 10:00am

***The Meeting adjourned at 10:34am***

**Signature:** .....

**Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson**

**Dated** .....