



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

21 November 2024

Loughry College, CAFRE, Cookstown

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

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Apologies: None

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.

Mr Declan McAleer MLA declared that he had a close relative currently working for AFBI.

The Chair welcomed everyone to Loughry College, which is located between Cookstown and Dungannon, set in parkland bordered by mature woodlands and the Killymoon River. The Chair thanked CAFRE for allowing the Committee to use their facilities today in Loughry's Food Innovation Centre.

1. Apologies

None

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chair advised that he, Deputy Chair and Members had attended the Ulster Farmers Union rally at the Eikon Exhibition Centre at 7:30 pm on Monday 18th November. The UFU had called on farmers, landowners, and supporters of Northern Ireland's agricultural community to gather at the rally to unify voices against the family farm tax, which many argue threatens the future and sustainability of family-owned farms across Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee noted the attendance at the UFU Rally.

The Chair referred to a draft Press Release regarding the meeting being held in Loughry College, highlighting that the Committee will be hearing from rural groups on the issues they are currently facing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the press release, which was published after the meeting.

The representatives from the Rural Partnership Groups joined the meeting at 10.19 am

John Blair MLA joined the meeting at 10.20 am

3. Oral Briefing from the Rural Partnership Groups – Issues facing Rural Communities.

This Agenda Item has been recorded by Hansard.

The Committee considered the following papers:

- Paper dated 21st November - Rural Action
- NI Rural Women's Network – 'Our Vision – Visible, Influential and Valued'; and
- Rural Community Network.

The Committee welcomed following representatives from the Rural Partnership Groups:

- Ms Teresa Canavan, Rural Action;
- Mr Michael Kelly, Rural Action;
- Ms Louise Coyle, Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network;
- Ms Ciara Forsythe, Northern Ireland Rural Women's Network; and
- Ms Kate Clifford, Rural Community Network.

The three rural groups briefed the Committee on issues facing rural communities and there then followed a question and answer session.

The meeting was covered by Hansard so the minutes reflect a high level summary of issues discussed.

Representatives covered many issues including overall rural poverty, poor public transport infrastructure, difficulties in accessing health services, increasing number of people feeling isolated, lack of child care services leading to poor employment prospects, lack of affordable housing, and mental health problems.

Overall, the Groups proposed that a flexible and funded Rural Development Programme is needed to address these matters. The Groups noted that the

recently published draft Programme for Government has little focus on rural matters.

The Committee heard of the need for multi-year funding to support rural development delivery and legislation to secure TRPSI and core funding.

The Committee heard that the Rural Needs Act 2016 means that all Departments have responsibilities in the rural space and that any review of the Act should ensure it ends up with more “teeth”.

It was accepted that DAERA is the lead Department but that there should be stronger Executive-led support for rural matters. The Groups felt that there is a lack of full understanding of rural proofing policies across departments.

The Committee thanked the groups for giving such substantial and useful evidence, including issues facing women in the rural community. It was proposed that the Committee consider re-highlighting the Breaking the Glass Ceiling Report, which the previous AERA Committee had published.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department on progress of the Breaking the Glass Ceiling Report published 2022, and work the Department is currently undertaking to break down rural barriers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to discuss the issues raised at a future committee meeting, and to collate the information from today’s evidence session. The aim being to increase understanding of rural issues and needs; influence the development of both the new Rural Policy and also any review of the Rural Needs Act.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the issues raised remain on the Forward Work Programme.

Áine Murphy MLA left the meeting at 11.10 am

Áine Murphy MLA re-joined the meeting at 11.14 am

John Blair MLA left the meeting at 11.52 am

John Blair MLA re-joined the meeting at 11.59 am

Michelle McIlveen MLA left the meeting at 12.10 pm

Michelle McIlveen MLA re-joined the meeting at 12.08 pm

The Rural Partnership Groups left the meeting at 12.15 pm

The Meeting was suspended at 12.15 pm

The Meeting was reconvened at 12.24 pm

Tom Buchanan MLA left the meeting at 12.24 pm

The Rural Support Network representatives joined the meeting at 12.24 pm

4. Briefing from the Rural Support Networks (RSNs) – Issues facing Rural Communities.

Agenda Item 4 has been recorded by Hansard.

The Committee welcomed the following representatives from the Rural Support Networks:

- Ms Mary T Conway, Omagh Forum for Rural Associations;
- Mr Nicholas McCrickard, County Down Rural Community Network; and
- Ms Diane Ewart, TADA Rural Support Network

The following paper was handed out to the Committee:

- Local Rural Support Networks – A Unique Rural Infrastructure.

The Rural Support Network works across Northern Ireland within eight networks, each working independently ensuring accountability and representation from the communities they serve. They have a membership of over 3000.

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

The Committee noted the major issues facing rural communities are poverty, physical infrastructure, physical health, transport and housing.

The Committee heard of the need for core funding and multi-year funding to secure the work they undertake and that currently they are in an ongoing search for funding sources, which puts added stress and instability on the work of the networks.

The Committee heard about the MAIRA (Maximising Access In Rural Areas) Project rolled out by the Rural Support Networks to address food poverty.

The Committee highlighted the need for rural communities to be included in the Just Transition of the Climate Change Act and the need for the Department to consider the environment across all rural policy areas.

The Committee noted that the rural groups have many invaluable ideas the Department could be availing of and a robust community network to support climate change.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to discuss the issues raised at a future committee meeting, and to collate the information from today's evidence session. The aim being to increase understanding of rural issues and needs; influence the development of both the new Rural Policy and also any review of the Rural Needs Act.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the issues raised remain on the Forward Work Programme.

The Rural Support Network Representatives left the meeting at 12.23 pm

5. Any Other Business

None

6. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on **Thursday 28 November in Parliament Buildings, at 10.00am**

The Meeting adjourned at 13.24 pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated