



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

3 April 2025

Parliament Buildings, Room 21

Present: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
Aoife Finnegan MLA
William Irwin MLA
Patsy McGlone MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Áine Murphy 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 10:13am

Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting at 10.18am

The Deputy Chair advised the Committee that he would be chairing the first hour or so of the meeting as the Chair was not available until around 11am.

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.

Declan McAleer MLA declared that he had previously served as a councillor on Fermanagh and Omagh District Council.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Deputy Chair referred to an invitation from the SULS Project team to visit Blackiston Houston Estates site in Dundonald to hear about their Farm2Export Project and for a demonstration of the process of livestock slurry separation that they are developing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the invitation to the list of potential visits.

The Deputy Chair referred to an invitation from the Managing Director of the Irish Grouse Conservation Trust to visit their operation at Glenwherry and the Antrim Hills to witness its ongoing work, which has succeeded in restoring the population of Irish Red Grouse from eight 20 years ago, to over 300 today.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the invitation to the list of potential visits.

The Deputy Chair advised the Committee that, in keeping with the Executive's commitment in the New Decade New Approach document to conduct Reviews of Arm's Length Bodies, a review of AFBI has been undertaken and a report is under

consideration by the Minister and that a review of the NI Fishery Harbour Authority is ongoing

Agreed: The committee agreed to write to the Department to seek a formal update on the list of bodies to be reviewed and the timetable for these reviews.

The Chair referred to an email received from the Cabragh Concerned Residents Association regarding the matter of an ongoing odour nuisance. The Committee noted that Sawgrass Substrates Ltd now operates on the site.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Sawgrass Substrates Limited to seek further information on the odour reported from the site.

4. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting on 27 March were agreed and signed by the Chair to be published.

Agreed: The Minutes were agreed.

5. Matters Arising

5.1 The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 27 March, regarding the Avian Influenza Outbreak.

The response stated that the agreed policy is to pay compensation to the value of the poultry immediately before culling and not for birds which have died because of a disease incursion. However, where there has been a delay in initiating a cull, a potential for an ex-gratia payment may be considered on a case-by-case basis.

The Committee also noted that following this current outbreak a review regarding the timing between confirmation of disease and culling commencing, and what further support is available to farmers will be undertaken.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the response.

5.2 The Committee considered an update from the Minister, dated 28 March, regarding Foot and Mouth Disease (FMD) in Slovakia and Highly pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) in a sheep in England.

The update stated that:

- on 21 March FMD was confirmed in Slovakia in three cattle herds and as of 26 March a further case was identified at a fourth premises and a further outbreak has been confirmed in Hungary;
- Following a Departmental tracing exercise, no commodities requiring veterinary certification had been imported to NI from these countries; and
- On 24 March the first reported case of HPAI was confirmed in a sheep in Yorkshire with no infection detected in the remaining flock and there is no evidence to suggest an increased risk to the UK's livestock population or to the general public.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the response and keep a watching brief on the matter.

5.3 The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 31 March, regarding The Farming for Sustainability Knowledge Transfer Payments Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

The Committee noted that advice in relation to the tax status of these payments is not available as it sits outside DAERA's responsibilities and any information provided by DAERA would carry no standing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the response and that it awaits a response from HMRC in this matter.

5.4 The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 1st April regarding the Draft Budget 2025-26 – Query on Just Transition Fund for Agriculture (JTfA). The response provided details of projects the £12.8m Capital DEL funds will be directed towards:

- £5.5m for Bovine Genetic Improvements to assist farmers to make better informed breeding decisions for environmentally sustainable animals with reduced methane emissions and pollution potential;
- £5.4 for Sustainable Utilisation of Livestock Slurry (SULS) programme; and
- £1.4m for Farming for Carbon - this includes two elements: Livestock Dietary Emissions Challenge Fund and Carbon Footprinting Project.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the response.

5.5 The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 1st April, regarding the merger of two planning teams within the Natural Environment Division (NED) of NIEA. The merger on 2 December 2024 combined the Conservation Designation and Protection team (CDP) into the main planning team within NED- Countryside, Coast and Landscapes – Planning (CC&L).

The response stated that casework regarding proposals within designated sites and air quality related casework and all other natural heritage issues will now be assessed and responded to by a single case officer.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the response.

The Fermanagh & Omagh District Councillors joined the meeting at 10:24 am

Robbie Butler MLA joined the meeting at 10.48am

Áine Murphy MLA left the meeting at 11.27am

Áine Murphy MLA re-joined the meeting at 11.31am

Declan Murphy MLA left the meeting at 11.37am

Declan Murphy MLA re-joined the meeting at 11.41am

John Blair MLA left the meeting at 11.42am

John Blair MLA re-joined the meeting at 11.46am

6. Briefing from Fermanagh & Omagh District Council - Agricultural Liaison Group (ALG)

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The following Councillors briefed the Committee:

- Cllr Josephine Deehan

- Cllr Sheamus Greene
- Cllr John McClaughry
- Cllr Bernard McGrath
- Cllr Allan Rainey

The Committee heard that addressing the needs of a rural region and promoting the wellbeing of rural communities remains a key focus for the Council. The Councillors then highlighted a wide range of agricultural and environmental matters relating to their district including climate change impacts; importance of farm payment schemes to farmers and concerns regarding the control of Bovine Tuberculosis.

The Councillors highlighted concerns over planning delays regarding ammonia emissions and the need for support for farmers in this regard but also the need to protect waterways from pollution.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee noted the issue of planning restrictions in connection with ammonia emissions and the frustrations expressed by the Councillors on behalf of farmers regarding delays to planning.

The Deputy Chair thanked the Councillors for the briefing and for travelling to Parliament Buildings.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask to be kept updated regularly on the progress of the Ammonia Strategy and subsequent Ammonia Action Plan.

The Fermanagh & Omagh District Councillors left the meeting at 11.56 am
The meeting was suspended at 11.56am
The meeting resumed at 12.11pm

The NIMGA representatives joined the meeting at 12.12pm
Declan McAleer MLA re-joined the meeting at 12.13pm
Patsy McGlone MLA joined the meeting at 12.32pm

7.Agriculture Bill - Briefing from NIMGA

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted it had asked if those who had responded to the Call for Evidence wished to make a further submission, following the Minister's decision that he will not be closing the FVAS at the end of 2025 and NIMGA wished to brief again.

The following NIMGA representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr John McArdle, Deputy Chairperson, NIMGA
- Mr Martin McKee, Member, NIMGA

The Committee heard that the extension of the FVAS is welcomed but concerns still remain and that any new scheme should have ringfenced funding at 4.1% as a baseline above which the Department could exercise discretionary powers.

The Committee also heard concerns about potential disruption to funding in the transition period between the current scheme ending and the commencement of a replacement scheme.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Chair thanked the representatives for the briefing.

The NIMGA representatives left the meeting at 12.30pm

The Mushroom PO representatives joined the meeting at 12.31pm

7. Agriculture Bill - Briefing from Mushroom Producer Organisation

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The following representatives briefed the Committee

- Ms Liz Kelly, General Manager, Mushroom Producer Organisation
- Mr Andrew Mulligan, Member, Commercial Mushroom Growers UK Ltd
- Mr David Dallas, Technical Manager, Northway Mushrooms

The Committee heard that although the extension of the scheme is welcomed there are concerns that the scheme is only open to growers who are members of a PO registered in Northern Ireland and it is likely there will be none as of 01 January 2026. Clarity is required from the Department if the formation of a new PO in Northern Ireland will result in forfeit of existing funding.

The Committee also heard that concerns still remains regarding the discretionary element in Clause 1 and the representatives requested ringfenced funding set at a baseline of 4.1% above which discretionary powers can be exercised.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Chair thanked the representatives for the briefing.

The Mushroom PO representatives left the meeting at 12:47pm

9. Departmental Written Briefing - Northern Ireland Food Animal Information System (NIFAIS) Update on go-live date for Stage 2

The written briefing advised that NIFAIS is an IT Project to replace, in stages, the Animal and Public Health Information System (APHIS) used to deliver full traceability, disease control and public health functions.

The Committee noted that Stage 1 went live in September 2023 and Stage 2 is currently going through testing and an independent assurance assessment of project preparedness for 'going live' is scheduled at the end of April. The expected release will be in late June or early September.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the briefing.

10. Departmental Written Briefing - Update on DAERA marine licensing clauses in the Financial Provisions Bill and annual uplift of marine licensing fees

The written briefing advised that DAERA currently can prescribe a fee for an application for a marine licence only and that clauses in the Financial Provision Bill will give it new powers to charge for costs incurred for related aspects of the licensing process.

The Committee noted that amending the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 will give DAERA similar fee charging powers to those available to other UK Regulators.

The Committee also noted that Marine licensing fees for 2025/26 are to increase by 2.37% from 1 April 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the briefing.

11. Correspondence.

The Committee considered the Investment Strategy Northern Ireland [ISNI] Delivery Tracking System (DTS) - investing activity report, DAERA, dated 30 March.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the report and return to the matter at a later date as it still had concerns regarding costs and length of some projects.

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance, dated 27 March, regarding the Analysis of 2024-25 Outturn and Forecast Outturn.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the memo.

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Committee for the Executive Office, dated 27 March, regarding Budget 2025/ 2026 – Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy. The memo stated it has been identified as a priority in the Programme for Government and the Committee for the Executive Office has asked Committees if their Department has a role delivering the Strategy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask about its role in delivering actions for rural women and girls as part of the Strategy and if so, how much funding was bid for and/or earmarked for the actions and which activities is it delivering under the Strategy.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 1 April, regarding the Pollution Prevention and Control PPC District Councils Charging Scheme NI 2025.

The Department advises that the fee charging scheme business operators of PPC activities are required to pay to cover the regulator's costs has been updated for 2025 and no major amendments have been made.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme and agreed it to be published.

The Committee noted last week it agreed to hear from young farmers clubs and the Ulster Farmers Union at the Balmoral Show and invitations have been issued.

The Committee also noted that it will take part in an engagement event after the meeting at the Balmoral Show.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Forward Work Plan to be published.

13. Any Other Business

The Committee noted recently imposed reciprocal international trade tariffs by the United States of America on imports from the United Kingdom and imports from the European Union.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek an oral briefing on the impact of tariffs on matters relevant to its remit, with a particular focus on Northern Ireland's position with The Windsor Framework.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a briefing from RalSe in relation to the impact on areas specific to agriculture.

14. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on **Thursday 10 April at 10.00am in Parliament Buildings**

The meeting went into closed session at 12.59pm

The meeting adjourned at 1.35 pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated