



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

19 September 2024

James Frazer Room, Clondeboye Estate, Bangor

Present: Lord Elliott MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Nicola Brogan MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
William Irwin MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Áine Murphy MLA

Present by Video or Teleconference:

None

Apologies: Patsy McGlone MLA

In Attendance: Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk
Mrs Gillian Barker, Assistant Assembly Clerk

Mr Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor

The Meeting Opened in Public Session at 10.13 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

Patsy McGlone MLA

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chair highlighted to the Committee the draft Press Release regarding today's visit to Clandeboy Estate, if agreed this would be released after the meeting.

Agreed: The Committee considered and agreed the draft Press Release.

3. Minutes

Minutes of the 12 September 2024 were signed and agreed to be published.

4. Matters Arising

The Committee considered the response, dated 15 September, from the Department, further to its letter of 15 April 2024, regarding the Environmental Principles Policy Statement (EPPS) – Public Consultation.

The Committee noted that the purpose of the EPPS is to explain to policymakers how five environmental principles, previously applied through the Treaty on the

Functioning of the EU, should be interpreted and applied. In due course the EPPS will need Executive approval before being laid before the Assembly.

The Committee noted that Officials had previously provided written briefing on this matter to the Committee and that it is the Minister's intention to publish the draft EPPS for a ten week public consultation on 30 September.

Agreed: The Committee noted the response and agreed to receive an oral briefing once the consultation has been completed.

Nicola Brogan MLA joined the meeting at 10.20 am

Áine Murphy MLA joined the meeting at 10.21 am.

5. Oral Briefing – SL1 – HOPS Certification (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Chair reminded the Committee that it had considered the SL1 HOPS Certification (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 at last week's meeting, when the matter of the extent of the divergence from GB was raised.

The Committee noted the SR will be laid under the negative resolution procedure and it is anticipated it will come into operation on 18 October 2024.

The Committee noted they had received correspondence of the HOPS Certification (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 on 9th May; and an oral briefing on 20th June.

The Committee noted that there are no Hops producers in Northern Ireland and that the rationale for the need for separate amending Regulations in Northern Ireland, is that EU regulations have been repealed and replaced and therefore the UK wide Hops Certification Regulations 1979 require updating. As the matter falls

under the Windsor Framework separate Regulations are required for Northern Ireland.

The Chair welcomed the following DAERA Officials to brief the Committee:

- Ms Samantha Swann, Head of Agri Policy; and
- Mr Kristopher Todd, Agri Policy.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their briefing,

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Department should proceed with the Statutory Rule 'HOPS Certification (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 and it will consider the SR in due course.

Suzie Cave, Assembly Researcher, RalSe joined the meeting at 10.24 am

6. Oral Briefing from RalSe – Just Transition – Climate Change.

The Committee noted the following RalSe research briefing paper:

- Just Transition – Climate Change

The Chair welcomed the following RalSe Assembly Official to the meeting:

- Ms Suzie Cave – Research Officer

The Committee heard that the Research paper provided the history of the Just Transition concept and that in 2015 the United Nations Paris Agreement marked a global acceptance of Just Transition as an integral approach to addressing climate change.

The Committee noted the aspects of Just Transition included in the Climate Change Act NI 2022.

The paper includes a number of considerations for the Committee to consider for future scrutiny work on this topic and also information on neighbouring jurisdictions and internationally on how Just Transition is being approached.

The Committee noted the Executive and Departments still have a lot of work to do on this matter and that Northern Ireland is considerably behind other legislatures in its Just Transition journey.

The Chair thanked Ms Cave for her comprehensive briefing.

Agreed: The Committee noted the briefing and agreed to keep the matter on the Forward Work Programme, and will request a further briefing later on in the session.

Ms Cave left the meeting at 10.52 am

7. Oral Briefing – Clandeboy Estate Officials

The Committee welcomed the following to the meeting:

- Mr Mark Logan, Estate Manager, Claneboy Estate; and
- Mr Patrick Black, Commercial Manager, Clandeboy Estate.

The Committee received a briefing from the Estate Manager and Commercial Manager. They highlighted that the Clandeboy Estate is approximately 2070 acres (including 720 acres farmable and 800 acres of woodland) and that the building and development of the anaerobic digester has resulted in the Estate being almost self-sufficient in term of electricity, and that any surplus is sold to the grid.

The Committee noted how the Estate diversified in 2007 to produce yoghurt utilising all milk from its own cows, and how this business has developed to its success today.

The Committee noted they would be receiving a tour of the farm to see the anaerobic digester and the yoghurt factory.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Chair thanked Mr Logan and Mr Black for their briefing and were looking forward to seeing the Yoghurt Factory and Farm Estate.

Agreed: The Committee noted the briefing.

Mr Logan and Mr Black left the meeting at 11.33 am.

8. Departmental Written Briefing – Launch of Phase 2 SBRI on Sustainable Utilisation of Livestock Slurry.

The Committee agreed to move this item to next week due to the announcement and photo call with the Minister regarding the launch of 'Phase 2 on Sustainable Utilisation of Livestock Slurry', being delayed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider this item at next week's meeting.

9. Departmental Written Briefing – Northern Ireland Environment Agency Business Plan 2024-25

The Committee noted the written briefing from the Department regarding NI Environment Agency Plan 2024-25, outlining targets and delivery of six Ministerial Priorities - Lough Neagh; Mobuoy; Planning; Provision of Effective and Efficient Regulation and Enforcement of Drinking Water Supplies; and the Management of over 36 Projects through the Environment Fund

The Committee noted that the targets and priorities within the plan have been developed in collaboration between all NIEA business areas and through engagement with business areas in the Department.

The Committee noted that the NIEA highlight that the funding reprioritisation will enable NIEA to ensure appropriate focus on the areas where there is urgent need for action, alongside business-as-usual work.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request an update on the number of planning applications currently in the system since the previous update to the Committee in March 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a further briefing on NIEA's Business Plan, and a date will be added to the Forward Work Programme.

Áine Murphy MLA left the meeting at 11.38 am

Áine Murphy MLA re-joined the meeting at 11.40 am

10. Department Written Briefing SIB Review of the TB Eradication Partnership

The Committee noted the written briefing from the Department regarding the completion of the SIB Review of the TB Eradication Partnership.

The Committee was reminded that the establishment of the TBEP was a recommendation of the TB Strategic Partnership Group, which published its report on the development of a TB Eradication Strategy for Northern Ireland in 2016.

The Committee noted SIB review highlights that if the bTB Eradication Strategy is to be implemented, monitored and, where required, revised and re-focused, the Department will need access to the views from a range of stakeholders including the scientific community, industry and eNGOs/environmental and conservation sector.

The Committee are concerned about the amount of time that has elapsed since the TB Strategic Partnership Group reported back in 2016.

Members were not clear on the status of previous recommendations to tackle bTB and queried when the Chief Veterinary Officer's Review of all aspects of bTB (including the SIB Report) would be completed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a briefing from Officials on the SIB Report and also and from the Chief Veterinary Officer once his Review has been completed.

11. Written Briefing from Northern Ireland Aquaculture Representative Group.

The Committee noted the written briefing from the Northern Ireland Aquaculture Representative Group Aquaculture, which provides a cross-sector voice and

enable collaborations and engagement with the Department, statutory agencies and linking with research and innovation networks.

The Committee noted the issues highlighted by the Group to ensure need for sustainable development within the sector:

- Re-defining aquaculture governance, including a licensing system that is fit for purpose, via a new NI Fisheries Act.
- Developing a time-bound and resourced plan for the sustainable development of NI's aquaculture sector, including identifying areas of aquaculture potential for consideration in the NI Marine Plan.
- Establishing an industry-science partnership to ensure research and development resources are applied as effectively as possible.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department requesting what plans it has for engaging with the Group and for rebuilding the sector.

12. Correspondence

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 4 September, from Joseph Doherty, Managing Director of Re Gen, Newry who is asking to meet with the Committee in the near future. The Committee noted included in this correspondence a short report, 'Investing, Innovating & Eliminating the Pathway to Decarbonisation' – recycling policy in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that Re-Gen is already on the list of potential visits and noted that it will be receiving a briefing from the Department in the near future on the Public Consultation on "Rethinking our Resources: Measures for Climate Action and a Circular Economy in NI" and will then consider the matter of recycling policy.

The Committee considered the 22nd Report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules, dated 11 September 2024.

Agreed: The Committee noted the Examiner has not drawn any attention to Statutory Rules relevant to the AERA Committee.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 12 September, from the Clerk to the Committee for the Executive Office, regarding the draft Programme for Government which was published on 9th September.

The Committee for the Executive Office takes a lead role in co-ordinating a response across all of the Assembly's statutory Committees and has written to all statutory Committees to request a formal response to the draft Programme for Government by noon on 18th October.

The Committee noted that a briefing has been arranged for its meeting of 10 October on the draft PfG with links to the Business Plan and to specific budgets.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider a draft response for the Committee for the Executive Office, on this matter at its meeting of 17 October.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 13 September, from the Northern Ireland Audit Office [NIAO]. The NIAO have compiled a report on DAERA, priorities and funding, including an overview of the NIAO's programme of audit work and any recently published reports relevant to DAERA and this Committee.

NIAO current and future work programme of direct relevance includes:

- Public Bodies' Response to Misrepresented Soil Analysis – published July 2024;
- Review of Waste Management in Northern Ireland – published July 2024;
- Waste Crime (Scheduled to publish December 2024); and
- Energy Efficiency (Scheduled to publish early 2025).

Previous NIAO Reports include:

- Water Quality in Northern Ireland's rivers and Lakes - published March 2024; and

- Approaches to Achieving Net Zero Across the UK – published September 2023.

The Committee noted that NIAO has examined the DAERA's funding and how this has been allocated, including that the report highlights for 2023/24 the C&AG issued a 'qualified true and fair audit opinion' due to the omission of a provision of £107 million relating to the estimated costs of remediating the contaminated illegal dump site at Mobuoy (and for the comparative figures for 2022-23).

The Committee noted that it is the C&AG's opinion the conditions required by International Accounting Standard 37 have been met and a provision for this cost should be included within the financial statements.

Agreed: The Committee noted the correspondence and that the Public Accounts Committee have 'primacy' over published NIAO reports.

The Committee considered correspondence from Western Innovations Network regarding Anaerobic Digestion in Northern Ireland. They are currently working with two other companies in Newry designing a small scale bio-refinery on a unique way of utilising digestate to make bio-diesel.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Western Innovations Network and request more information on the proposal and the two companies involved and also to request if they have met with the Minister or Departmental Officials.

The Committee considered correspondence from Ann Watt, Director of Pivotal regarding its new report published – 'The first seven months of the restored Northern Ireland Executive'. The report has reviewed Northern Ireland's biggest policy challenges and suggests some priorities ahead. Pivotal would welcome an opportunity to discuss the issues and analysis in this report with the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange an informal meeting with Pivotal that the Chair and deputy Chair will attend.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 13 September, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding the issues considered at its Committee Meeting on 11th September – namely, Budget 2025/26 Timeline; Budget Commissioning Templates; and Scrutiny of Budgeting for the PfG. The Finance Committee agreed that it would be useful for other committees to see this information.

The Committee noted they have two relevant budget briefings organised:

- 3rd Oct on the October Monitoring;
and agreed at this meeting,
- 10th October on the PfG, linked to specific budgets and the Business Plan.

Agreed: The Committee noted the correspondence

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 13 September, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance; that at its meeting of 11 September, the Committee for Finance noted a copy of a Written Statement made by the Minister of Finance on 28 August. This is regarding a cash advance to DAERA and some additional information as to the specifics. Members agreed that this extra information should be shared with this Committee.

Agreed: The Committee noted the correspondence

13. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted the draft autumn Forward Work Programme to 24 October 2024. The Committee agreed to add to the Forward Work Programme a meeting and visit to CAFRE Loughry College, Cookstown and to invite Rural Partnership Groups.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the draft Forward Work Programme.

14. Any Other Business

None

15. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on
Thursday 26 September, at 10.00 am in Parliament Buildings, Room 21

The Meeting adjourned at 11.52 am

Signature:

Lord Elliott, Chairperson

Dated