



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

## Minutes of Proceedings

3 October 2024

Parliament Buildings, Room 21

**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:**

None

**Apologies:** None

**In Attendance:** Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk  
Mrs Gillian Barker, Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Mr Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor

Ms Sarah Preece, Clerical Officer

***The Meeting Opened in Public Session at 10.03 am***

*The Chair opened the meeting by paying tribute to Lord Elliott for his work as Chair of the Committee since the Assembly resumed in February 2024; and wished him all the best for his future endeavours in the House of Lords. The Committee Members also paid tribute to the outgoing Chair and conveyed their best wishes and thanks for all of his work with the Committee.*

***Agreed:*** *The Committee agreed to write to Lord Elliott to convey their thanks for his time as Chair of the AERA Committee and to wish him all the best in the House of Lords.*

*The Chair advised the Committee this would be a shorter public meeting than usual as the Committee will be participating in an Effective Question Techniques, in closed private session from around 10:45am..*

*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.*

***Agreed:*** *There were no further Declaration of Interests. The new Chair had no interests to declare.*

**1. Apologies**

The Committee noted the following members gave their apologies for the second part of the meeting today, that is the Effective Questioning Techniques:

Tom Buchanan MLA

Patsy McGlone MLA

Michelle McIlveen MLA

## **2. Chairperson's Business**

The Chair advised that a letter, dated 28 September, was received from Lord Elliott of Ballinamallard thanking the Committee and Committee Team and for their support during his time as Chair of AERA, and in making the Committee a positive environment. Lord Elliott gives his best wishes for the future work of the AERA Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the correspondence and wished Lord Elliott all the best in his new role in the House of Lords.

The Chair advised the Committee of an invitation for the Committee, to the launch of the 'Centre for Public Policy and Administration' on Friday 25 October, from 9.00 am to 1.00 pm in Queen's University.

The Centre is a new initiative at Queen's designed to strengthen collaboration between academia and policy-makers, building on well-established models of best practice supported by the UK Government.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the invitation and Members will contact the Committee Team if they will be attending.

## **3. Minutes**

Minutes of the 26<sup>th</sup> September 2024 were signed by the deputy Chair, and agreed to be published.

#### 4. Matters Arising

The Committee considered the response, dated 27 September, from the Department, in reply to its letter of 13 September, regarding Sheep Taskforce – Support for the Sheep Industry.

The Committee noted the Minister is yet to meet with the Sheep Industry Taskforce but plans to early this month and will advise the Committee on the out-workings of the meeting in due course.

The Committee noted the Department, in respect of the carbon impact of hill sheep farming, it is the National Atmospheric Emissions Inventory models, not DAERA, that disaggregates the sheep sector allowing comparisons to be made between the emissions of sheep across a range of farm types.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the response.

The Committee considered response from the Department, dated 27 September, in reply to its letter of 13 September, regarding the NI Audit Office Report – Misrepresented Soil Analysis asking for clarification on what controls and measures NIEA put in place, what was communicated, and to which stakeholders.

The Committee noted the Department has control measures in place as set out on the DAERA webpage. The measures require the submission of additional information to allow the authenticity of soil sample analysis reports to be determined by NIEA. On becoming aware of the widespread submission of false soil sample analysis Reports, NIEA alerted relevant stakeholders of the issue. The relevant stakeholders were:

- The Department for Infrastructure Planning Group.
- 11 Local Councils.
- The NI Audit Office.
- Shared Environmental Services.
- Internal DAERA Colleagues, including Governance Branch and regular up-dates to the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee.
- The Department of Finance Group Fraud Investigation Service, who liaised with the PSNI Economic Crime branch.

- The Department for the Economy Renewable Obligation Certificates Team.
- The Planning Appeals Commission.

The Committee noted that all stakeholders were given information on the discovery of the suspected fraud so that they could consider the relevant actions within the scope of their responsibilities.

In relation to the Local Councils, information on the suspected fraud was provided, for each specific planning application within its jurisdiction that was affected.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the correspondence and that PAC has primacy on this report.

The Committee considered the response from the Northern Ireland Mushroom Growers Association (NIMGA), dated 27 September, which is in reply to its email of 13 September, requesting a response from the NIMGA regarding the 'Review of the Seasonal Worker visa by Migration Advisory Committee (MAC). The NIMGA have now made comments, including that the review fails to provide any remedy for the critical challenges facing the sector in relation to access to labour.

The Committee noted the current six-month visa through the Seasonal Workers Visa is one of the only means through which mushroom farms can access labour.

The Committee noted that this arrangement is sub-optimal and is costing farms over £8000 per worker for six months. The response also included comments on the five main themes of MAC's recommendations to the Home Office.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department and to ask for their response on these comments.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for the Economy, to ask what discussions or actions that Committee has taken or is planning to take with regard to the MAC Review on the Seasonal Workers Visa - specifically around securing better visas for Mushroom Pickers as the Seasonal Workers Visa does not operate effectively for this industry.

The Committee considered correspondence from RaISe regarding a correction to evidence given at last week's meeting. RaISe stated last week there had been no review of the Rural Needs Act since 2016.

However, they wish to state in correction that rather the Department formed a working group in 2019 to undertake a limited review of its operation / implementation and a report was published in 2020.

The Committee noted that an updated version of the paper is now published and includes the wording:

*'A review into the implementation of the Rural Needs Act was instigated by DAERA in 2019 through a working group. The Chair of this working group acknowledged the limitations of the review; 'the focus of the review was on the implementation of the legislation by public authorities and the support provided by DAERA rather than on the policy outcomes and the impacts on public services'.*

The working group published the report in 2020, which includes 25 recommendations. The 'Report on the Review of the Implementation of the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016', was included in the Committee Pack.

**Agreed:** The Committee accepted the apology from RaISe and noted the updated published paper.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted they will be receiving a briefing from the Officials in the Department's Rural Policy Unit; and requested that the briefing includes coverage of the:

- The Working Group Review of the Rural Needs Act (published in 2020);
- An update on the implementation of the 25 recommendations from that Review; and
- Details of any plans to further assess the implementation of the Rural Needs Act, in terms of the policy outcomes, impacts on services and improvements in rural areas.

The Committee considered response from the Department, dated 30 September, in reply to its letter of 13 September, regarding 'Bluetongue Virus - Movement of Animals'. That is if the Department had any information to suggest that animals are being acquired irresponsibly or illegally, thereby risking an incursion of Bluetongue.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the Department confirmed that it has no information to suggest that animals are being sourced illegally. That the Department and industry have both called on farmers to source animals responsibly in order to reduce the risk of a Bluetongue incursion.

The Committee considered a substantial response from the Department dated 30 September, in reply to its letter of 20 September, regarding plans for engaging with the Aquaculture Representative Group (ARG), to tackle the issues for rebuilding the sector.

The response addresses current and future challenges, supporting balanced, industry-led sustainable growth of aquaculture, in line with the priorities of the draft Programme for Government.

The Committee noted the Minister has included high-level policy themes in the forthcoming Fisheries Bill for supporting the sustainable development of all aquaculture sub-sectors.

The Department's response notes ARG's concerns regarding water quality and how it impacts aquaculture. The response highlighted various improvements to address this - including Living with Water and EASE, which are embracing nature-based solutions. Also how the Environmental Improvement Plan is addressing water quality, together with the Lough Neagh Plan and Shellfish Action Plans.

The Committee noted that Minister Muir opened the Marine Environment and Fisheries Fund in July 2024, affording opportunities for provision of financial assistance across stakeholders, including aquaculture, in the current financial year.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted this matter is in their Forward Work Programme - to receive a written briefing mid-December on the development of the Fisheries Bill.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to forward the Department's response to the ARG and to ask for their comments.

The Committee considered the response from the Department dated 30 September, in reply to its letter of 13 September, regarding Lough Neagh – New Project Manager support to Fishing Industry and progress of Executive approval for the Environment Improvement Plan.

The Committee noted a new head of the Lough Neagh Action Plan Delivery and Governance took up post on 9 September 2024 and that work is progressing to establish a support team. It is planned to introduce programme management structures to govern and deliver the actions in the Lough Neagh Report and Action Plan.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the response and look forward to a briefing from the newly appointed Project Manager for the Lough Neagh Action Plan, in due course.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted the Environment Improvement Plan was agreed by the Executive and laid in the Assembly on 28 September. The Committee agreed to request a briefing from the relevant Officials on the Environment Improvement Plan.

***The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10.05 am***

***John Blair MLA joined the meeting at 10.08 am***

***William Irwin MLA joined the meeting at 10.08***

## **1. Oral Briefing from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs – Budget Update 2024-25**

The Committee noted the following papers:

- Briefing from the Department – Update on 2024-25 Financial Position; and



- Hansard – DAERA Budget 2024-25 - 6 June 2024.

The Committee noted that in August 2024, Department of Finance commissioned an 'In Year 2024-25 Urgent Information Gathering Exercise' to help inform Executive decisions on the management of departmental forecast over commitments. This was a separate exercise from the October Monitoring Round concentrating on the Executive's Resource DEL budget only.

The Members noted that the in-year exercise has not concluded, and DOF has not yet commissioned the October Monitoring Round.

The following Departmental Officials joined the meeting:

- Mr Roger Downey, Director of Finance;
- Mr Richard McAuley, Deputy Finance Director; and
- Ms Nuala Hennessy, Head of In Year Financial Planning Branch.

There then followed a question and answer session, which covered a range of issues including:

- The increasing costs for TB Bovine 2024 compensation - estimated at £40.8m for this year, the total being £55-60m when salary costs, veterinary costs etc. are added in – this equates to a significant percentage of the DAERA budget. Officials stated they are confident they will have sufficient funds in place through October Monitoring Round and the January Monitoring Round bids.
- The Committee noted that DAERA's Estate has been under review - to date the Department's footprint has been reduced by 40% due to the closure of Dundonald House and other significant buildings. The Estates Transformation Unit is addressing the disposal of other assets.
- The Committee noted TRPSI funding at £4.4m broken down to £2.6m for Rural Micro Capital Grant Scheme; and £1.2m for Rural Businesses.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department regarding pressures on the delivery of TRPSI funding to the Community and Voluntary Sector and if there has been any delays in processing these grants.

***The Officials left the meeting at 10.44 am***

## **5. Correspondence**

The Committee agreed that all correspondence from this week will be considered at next week's meeting, due the need to move into the Effective Questioning Session.

## **6. Any Other Business**

None

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

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on **Thursday 10 October, at 10.00 am in Parliament Buildings, Room 21**

***Mr Tom Buchanan MLA left the meeting;***

***Mr Patsy McGlone MLA left the meeting;***

***Ms Michelle McIlveen MLA left the meeting.***

***The meeting went into Closed Session at 10.45 am***

***The Committee received a session from Professor John Sturrock KC, Core Solutions, on 'Effective Questioning Techniques'.***

***The Meeting then adjourned at 1.10 pm***

**Signature: .....**

**Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson**

**Dated .....**