



# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

## Minutes of Proceedings

30 January 2025

### Parliament Buildings, Room 21

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

**Present by Video or Teleconference:**

Áine Murphy MLA  
Nicola Brogan MLA

**Apologies:** None

**In Attendance:** Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk  
Mrs Gillian Barker, Assistant 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 10.07 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 an interest under Agenda Item 5 as he was involved in a community group that received funding from the Community Ownership Fund.*

*Miss Nicola Brogan MLA declared that she had an interest under Agenda item 6 & 7 as her partner is named on a farm business.*

**1. Apologies**

None

**2. Chairperson's Business**

The Chair advised the Committee, that he visited Moy Park, Pilgrim's in Craigavon on 29 January in his capacity as an MLA. The issue of planning restrictions was discussed and the impact it is having on the ability of the company to expand and take on more orders and as a result Moy Park may be laying off staff. The Chair advised he was shown solutions to potentially exceed ammonia reductions in the buildings they are planning.

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

The Chair raised the issue of the potential for storm financial support for farmers and food growers - linked to ongoing food security, in light of last week's unprecedented storms.

**Agreed:** The Committee commended the work of the NIE in their ongoing efforts to reconnect power supplies, however, commented on how rural areas were disproportionately affected by the storm due to fallen trees. The need to mitigate the risk for trees planted on farm land to fall on power lines was raised. The Committee considered if NIE could perhaps brief the Committee on what specific considerations are given to its planning for rural areas. The Committee queried if there was a need for an Executive-wide review on the impact of severe weather on food security.

The Chair referred to the press release issued on 28 January by DAERA on the first meeting of the TB Partnership Steering Group, which listed the membership of the Steering Group.

The Chair asked if the Committee would be content to enquire if the Steering Group Chair Chief Veterinary Officer Brian Dooher is representing both DAERA and AFBI on the group as otherwise AFBI are not mentioned in the membership.

The Chair also highlighted a farmer he spoke to regarding the ongoing work he still had to put into his herd, in which there is bovine TB, without compensation to cover these expenses.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to contact the Department to confirm if Chief Veterinary Officer Brian Dooher is representing both DAERA and AFBI at the TB Steering Group and to highlight the Committee's concerns about the speed of the Departments response concerning compensation when TB is found in a herd.

### 3. Minutes

Minutes of the 23<sup>rd</sup> January were agreed and signed by the Chair to be published.

**Agreed:** The minutes were agreed.

### 4. Matters Arising

4.1 The Committee considered the response from the Minister dated 27 January regarding Fair Pricing - Food Supply Chain.

The Committee noted that Minister Muir welcomes the UK Government confirmation that it would further advance work on this matter.

The Committee noted that the Minister and his Officials have been proactively engaging, and will continue to do so, with counterparts in Defra and with his ministerial colleagues at the UK Inter-Ministerial Group meetings on the development of the UK 'fair dealing' legislation and related policy proposals and to secure better

protections for local farmers and growers. The Minister has also raised the issue of supply chain fairness, and the scope for enhanced collaboration.

The Committee noted that DAERA has met with the UK Agricultural Supply Chain Adjudicator and the Irish Agri-Food Regulator's team. The Committee noted that DAERA has also asked local farming representatives to identify specific issues for Northern Ireland relating to supply chain fairness to ensure they are properly addressed.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister requesting:

- Details of specific requests DAERA has made for Northern Ireland for the forthcoming fair dealing Regulations and the time scale for the introduction of the Regulations;
- How will DAERA ensure that any UK-wide fair dealing Regulations are tailored to meet any Northern Ireland specific needs; and
- What specific supply chain issues did the Minister raise at the UK Inter-Ministerial Group meeting in November 2024 and how did these issues compare to the situations in England, Scotland and Wales.

**Agreed:** The Committee also agreed to advise the Minister that it is willing to take actions to support him in this regard and ask what actions the Committee could take to proactively support him in this area.

***The Development Trusts NI Representatives joined the meeting at 10.07 am***

## **5. Oral Briefing from Development Trusts NI – Rural Assets: Policy and Practice Insights from Northern Ireland**

The Committee considered the following paper:

- Report - Rural Assets: Policy and Practice Insights from Northern Ireland

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr Charlie Fisher, CEO, Development Trusts Northern Ireland
- Dr Dani Hutcheon, Yunus Centre for Social Business & Health, Glasgow Caledonian University

- Mr Liam O'Hagan, Board member, Development Trusts Northern Ireland

The Committee noted that Development Trusts Northern Ireland (DTNI) serves as a network and advocate for community anchor organisations across Northern Ireland seeking to promote the principles of community development and social economy.

DTNI works with local communities, government, and the voluntary sector to promote policy reform and programmes that advance community ownership, participation, rights, and local economic development.

The Committee noted that the study aims to understand the impacts of the processes of community asset acquisition upon the empowerment, resilience and wellbeing of rural communities.

The Committee noted that DTNI stated the demand for community transfer of assets is high but that funding and lack of a streamlined local and national processes for acquisition of assets is an issue.

There then followed a question and answer session.

There was a proposal from DTNI regarding the potential need for legislation for a "community rights to buy" scheme similar to ones in place in England Scotland.

The Committee also noted the social and economic benefits to local communities and that the benefits of asset acquisition include tackling youth migration through the provision of services and facilities and transforming assets with negative historical associations. The Committee was asked if an Assembly debate could be considered on the matter

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it required further research in this matter and agreed that a research request would be made to RalSe. Following consideration of the RalSe Research paper the Committee would then discuss tabling a motion calling for a debate.

The Committee thanked the representatives for the briefing.

***John Blair MLA left the meeting at 11.08am***

***Join Blair MLA re-joined the meeting at 11.13 am***

***Tom Buchanan MLA joined the meeting at 11.12am***

***William Irwin MLA left the meeting at 11.13am***

***William Irwin MLA re-joined the meeting at 11.17am***

***Pasty McGlone MLA joined the meeting at 11.18am***

***The DTNI Representatives left the meeting at 11.27 am***

***The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11.27 am***

**6. Oral Briefing from the Department– Farm Support and Development Programme**

**7. Oral Departmental Briefing–SL1 - The Farm Sustainability (Transitional Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025**

***This item on the Agenda was recorded by Hansard***

**The Committee agreed to take agenda 6 and 7 together as they are related matters.**

The Committee considered the following papers:

- Briefing from the Department on the Farm Support and Development Programme
- SL1 - The Farm Sustainability (Transitional Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025
- Minister's Written Statement - Update on DAERA's new programme of farm support.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Dr Rosemary Agnew, Director of Agricultural Policy;
- George Moffett, Deputy Director of Agricultural Policy; and
- Manus McHenry, Deputy Director of Agricultural Policy

**Farm Support and Development Programme**

The Committee heard from Officials that DAERA's' new Farm Support and Development Programme is to be known as the Sustainable Agriculture Programme (SAP) of farm support and is being co-designed with the Northern Ireland agricultural industry and other main food and environmental stakeholders.

the Officials stated that the Programme is fundamental to support farmers and collectively achieve environmental and climate change goals, providing the right support and policies to achieve both economic and environmental sustainability.

The Committee noted that the Minister intends to issue a further written statement to the Assembly at the end of the month to outline his plans for communications in relation to the Programme.

The Committee heard that the Minister has agreed the timeline for the roll out of the next phase of schemes over the next two years and that this will be available on the Department's website in the coming days.

#### **SL1 - The Farm Sustainability (Transitional Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025**

The Officials stated that the SL1 replaces the Farm Sustainability Transition Payment (Transitional Provisions) Regulations, presented to Committee on 23 May 2024. On that date the when Officials Briefed Committee regarding the Farm Sustainability Payment replacing the Basic Payment Scheme, phased in over a 2-year period, commencing with the Farm Sustainability Transition Payment in 2025 and the full Farm Sustainability Payment in 2026.

The Committee noted that the Department intends to make a Statutory Rule (SR) to provide DAERA with the legal powers to implement the Farm Sustainability Transition Payment (FSTP). They also make a number of additional legislative changes to ensure the smooth roll out of the Farm Support and Development Programme.

The Committee noted that the Rule will be laid before the Assembly under the draft affirmative resolution procedure.

#### **There then followed a question and answer session regarding both matters.**

The Committee welcomed the Department awareness and information sessions for the programme. However, it was of concern to some Members that the plans to end the entitlements to new entrants will deter new farmers from entering the profession.

The Committee were drawn to the success in managing to exceed the Beef Carbon Reduction year one projections due to the number of farmers that joined the scheme

The Committee were pleased to note that the Minister had taken on board its wishes for the three hectare size to remain and not be increased to five. and also highlighted their concerns in relation to younger farmers were being overlooked and that their view sought be sought. The Committee also asked what plans the Department had for the establishment of a crisis fund.

The Committee thanked the Officials for the briefing

**Commented [thompsonj1]:** Took this out as they will ask the finance people next week (if they come!!)

***The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 12.25 am***

The Committee then had a discussion around the potential need for it to further engagement with stakeholders in relation to the SR.

The majority of Members expressed a view for more time for further engagement and scrutiny of the SR. It was highlighted by a Member that he was concerned that as the plans for the SR had already been discussed in May then it should not be subject to any further delay considering environmental impacts.

**Agreed:** The Committee then agreed to write to stakeholders listed on the Agricultural Policy Stakeholder Group giving them the opportunity to provide a written response within two weeks with their views on the SR with the offer of giving an oral briefing to the Committee.

***The meeting was adjourned at 12.47pm***

***The meeting resumes at 12.57pm***

***The NIMGA Representatives joined the meeting at 12.59 pm***

## **8. Agriculture Bill – Briefing from Northern Ireland Mushroom Growers Association**

***This item was recorded by Hansard***

The Committee considered the following paper:

- NIMGA Briefing for AERA Committee

The following representatives briefed the Committee:



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

The Committee heard that NIMGA proposes that the legislation is amended to retain 4.1% as the baseline above which the Minister can exercise discretionary powers and that the proposal to repeal the scheme is removed or replaced with at least the same level of support as was available under the FVAS.

The Committee noted that NIMGA's paper also set out proposals as to how the Producer Organisation scheme could be enhanced going forward and also outlines what actions NIMGA believes the Committee can take to assist.

The Committee also noted correspondence dated 28 January from The Executive Office (TEO) to NIMGA in which TEO expresses disappointment that the AERA Minister's suggestion of the introduction of a two-year occupation-specific bespoke visa route to help ensure that the sector could continue to compete with their counterparts in Ireland was not accepted by the UK Government.

There then followed a question and answer session.

In addition to their 'asks' regarding the Bill, the Committee heard of the issues that the mushroom industry has faced as a result of the recent storm. The industry also highlighted issues due to a lack of funding and access to workforce which means that growers are unable to plan years ahead unlike their counterparts in Ireland.

The Committee noted that the industry hopes to move towards a peat free process, which is costly, and believes that without proper funding the industry could disappear within **five** to ten years.

It was suggested that TEO should be contacted to enquire what contact has been made with the Home Office in relation to the issue with workforce visas

NIMGA highlighted that the Horticultural Pilot Scheme has no benefit to the Mushroom industry, yet the Department keeps referring them to the Plan.

The Committee thanked the representatives for the briefing.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to highlight NIMGA's comments regarding the Horticultural Pilot Scheme and to address the apparent communication issue.

**Commented [thompsonj2]:** I always use the words up to ten and then 11, 12 etc.

***The NIMGA Representatives left the meeting at 1.28 pm***

## **9. Correspondence.**

The Committee considered the correspondence memo.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the memo and considered the following correspondence in more detail.

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance, dated 23 January in relation to NICS sickness levels.

The Committee noted that the DoF has indicated that there does not appear to be any obvious direct link between the ratio of vacancies/staff in post when compared to stress-related absence and that the incidence of staff absence while complaint processes are ongoing is high. DoF indicated that staff on temporary promotion lost on average 2.5 working days due to sickness; with lower rates while on temporary promotion in each Department, this is compared to 6.8 working days lost by those staff not on temporary promotion.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the memo and Chair noted the care that needs to be taken in interpreting statistics such as this.

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance, dated 23 January in relation to the Budget 2025-2025 Round Robin Exercise.

The Committee noted that The Finance Committee is currently seeking all Committee's views on their respective department's 2025-26 Budget.

The Committee noted that a briefing on the draft budget has been requested for 6 February but the team were waiting for confirmation from Officials

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the memo and provide its comments after it received the budget briefing.

The Committee considered the Report entitled: The annual report and accounts (ARA) for the Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) for years ending 31 March 2022 and 31 March 2023.

The Committee noted that at the meeting of 23 January it considered correspondence from DAERA regarding the potential extension via an LCM to Northern Ireland of provisions in the UK Employment Rights Bill, which would abolish the GLAA and move its enforcement powers under the Secretary of State for Business and Trade.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the report.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department dated 23 January and to the report entitled: Lough Agencies Annual report and Accounts for 2023 -1 January 2023 to 31 December 2023.

The Committee noted The Loughs Agency are on the list of future Committee briefings.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the report.

The Committee considered correspondence received from the Department dated 23 January in relation to Environmental Noise Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006: Round 4 Publication of Strategic Noise Maps.

The Committee noted that the Regulations provide for Competent Authorities to undertake noise mapping of certain sources of environmental noise. Based on the results of these maps, which will be made public, Competent Authorities must develop Action Plans. The NIEA is the Competent Authority to manage noise from industry.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered a Clerk's Memo from the Clerk to the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (DSC) dated 24 January, and the DSC Inquiry Report 66/22-27

The Committee noted that the replacement EU act amends Regulation (EU) the 'Plant Health Regulation', which is the basic legal framework for EU plant health policy.

It also amends Regulation (EU) 2017/625 (the 'Official Controls Regulation'), which regulates the movement of plants, plant health and protection products.

The Committee noted that the replacement EU act aims to improve the application and enforcement of the Plant Health Regulation and the Official Controls Regulation, by streamlining and simplifying reporting requirements, and promoting standardised and digitalised procedures.

The Committee noted that the DSC concluded that the replacement EU act would not have a significant impact specific to everyday life of communities in Northern Ireland in a way that is liable to persist.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the memo and report.

The Committee considered a Clerk's Memo from the Clerk to the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (DSC) dated 24 January, and the DSC Inquiry Report 67/22-27

The Committee noted the replacement EU act: Regulation (EU) 2024/3110 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 November 2024 laying down harmonised rules for the marketing of construction products and repealing Regulation (EU) No 305/2011

The Committee noted that the DSC concluded that the replacement EU act would not have a significant impact specific to everyday life of communities in Northern Ireland in a way that is liable to persist.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the memo and report.

The Committee considered the Report entitled ISNI Delivery Tracking System- Investing Activity Report Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, dated 26 January 2025

The Committee noted that the ISNI Delivery Tracking System (DTS) is an Executive initiative designed to collate up-to-date information on the status of projects and their underlying investing activities (e.g. procurements) and, where appropriate, disseminate this to the public in an open and transparent manner.

**Agreed:** The committee agreed to note the report.

The Committee considered the 30<sup>th</sup> Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules dated 27 January 2025.

The Committee noted the Report refers to the following SRs of relevance to the Committee

- S.R. 2024/204: The Marine Licensing (Application Fees) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024
- S.R. 2024/211: The Direct Payments to Farmers (Cross-Compliance) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024
- S.R. 2024/212: The Environmental Protection (Single-use Vapes) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024

The Committee noted that no statutory rules in the report are drawn to the special attention of the Assembly.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the report.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Office of the Northern Ireland Executive in Brussels, regarding its Report for October - December 2024.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the report.

The Committee noted the Clerk's Memo, dated 28 January, from the Clerk to the Committee for Infrastructure and to a RalSe briefing paper.

The Committee noted that at the concurrent meeting with the Committee for Infrastructure on 12 November it had a briefing from The Ulster Farmers Union in relation to this matter.

The Committee noted that the RalSe paper sets out the compulsory purchase process for major road development and examines the principles of compensation for agricultural landowners subject to a vesting order within the context of the ongoing A5 Western Transport Corridor (A5WTC) road scheme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the RalSe paper for information.

The Committee considered the Pivotal Report entitled the Review of the First Year of the Restored NI Executive.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the report.

## **12. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

## **13. Any Other Business**

None

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

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on **Thursday 6 February at 10.00am at Parliament Buildings, in Room 21.**

***The Meeting adjourned at 1.39pm***

**Signature:** .....

**Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson**

Dated .....