



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

27 March 2025

Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Hillsborough

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

Apologies: Áine Murphy MLA

In Attendance: Dr Janice Thompson, 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 10.15am

1. Apologies

Áine Murphy MLA

2. Declaration of Interests

The Chair reminded Members of their responsibility to declare any interests in any of the items under discussion.

Declan McAleer MLA declared that he is named as an executor of a small farm in Co Tyrone.

William Irwin MLA declared that he is a partner in a farm business.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chair referred to the invitation from the Rt Hon Alistair Carmichael MP, Chair of the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee to an online meeting, which has now been arranged for 10am on Friday 16 May, between committee chairs and convenors to discuss inter-legislature engagement and shared policy areas.

It is planned that the EFRA Committee staff will prepare a note of the meeting.

Agreed: The Committee noted that the Chair and the Deputy Chair, if he wishes, will attend.

4. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting on 20 March were agreed and signed by the Chair to be published.

Agreed: The Minutes were agreed.

5. Matters Arising

5.1 The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 20 March, regarding an update on amendments to the UK Employment Rights Bill. The Committee noted it that the UK-wide Bill would abolish the Gangmaster and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA), move its enforcement powers under the Secretary

of State for Business and Trade and create a UK-wide Fair Work Agency (FWA) which will carry out the work of the GLAA going forward.

The Committee noted it had agreed to support the Legislative Consent Motion (LCM), on which the Department for Communities (DfC), is leading.

The Committee noted that Minister Muir's amendment has now been included that states consent must be obtained from the relevant Northern Ireland Department when dealing with a transferred matter and the Department is now satisfied with the LCM as currently drafted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

5.2 The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 21 March, in reply to the Committees request for further information on how and why the Farm Sustainability (Transitional Provisions) Regulations provide for the movement of funds between schemes.

The response stated that the Regulations include powers to move funds between relevant schemes; introduce changes and policies to enable continued roll-out of the Sustainable Agriculture Programme; and measures to allow DAERA to determine the budget for each scheme year prior to the commencement of payments.

The response also stated that the regulations provide DAERA with the power to make additional payments to farm businesses that are eligible for other support payment schemes in a scheme year, if required, and provide flexibility to direct funding to other areas of the Sustainable Agriculture Programme.

Members raised a concern that it did not feel that, regarding the Basic Payment Scheme, it was made fully aware of how changes could potentially move funds away from the scheme.

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 24 March, regarding SR 2025/41 The Suckler Cow Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland)

2025, in reply to the Committee request for clarity regarding the percentage of calving events across the year.

The response stated that figures for 2022-2023 show that, 20% of calving events occurred in January to March, peak calving then followed in April, May and June with 49% of calving events and then 31% of calving events occurred in July to December.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the response.

5.4 The Committee noted the response from the Department, dated 24 March, in reply to the Committee's request for details on the projects and actions to be funded under the Resource DEL and Capital DEL allocations following its briefing on the Lough Neagh Action Plan on 6 March.

The response stated that out of £4.3m Resource DEL funds allocations will include an additional enforcement team to focus on key hotspots; enhanced monitoring and support for measures to improve water quality and policy development to tackle blue green algae.

The response also stated that in relation to the £12.8m Capital DEL, the proposed allocations includes £3.5m for Digital transformation, £5.5m for Sustainable Use of Livestock Slurry (SULS) and £1.2m for Sustainable Catchment Project (SCP).

The Committee also noted the updates provided by the Department on Phase 2 of the SULS Small Business Research Initiative programme and I-Lab and PhD funding allocations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the response.

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10.17 am

Patsy McGlone MLA joined the meeting at 10.18 am

6. Committee Deliberations on the Agriculture Bill

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee continued its Deliberations on the Agriculture Bill and noted that it is not the formal clause by clause stage but the opportunity to go through the Clauses and comprehensively review with the Department any issues of concern.

The Committee noted the updated legal Advice from the Examiner of Statutory Rules, which includes a small correction to the report.

The Committee noted the response from the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHCR) stating that they have no comments to make regarding the Bill.

The Committee noted NIMGA has confirmed they wish to brief the Committee again next week in respect of the Minister's assurance regarding the current scheme not closing in December.

The following Departmental Officials briefed the Committee:

- John Terrington – Head of Agri-Food Legislation Branch; and
- Elaine McCrory – Head of Supply Chain Transition Team.

The Chair noted that as there were a few Members not able to attend Committee last week, the deliberations would commence at Clause 1 again to give all Members a chance to comment on each Clause.

The Officials gave the Committee a brief overview of each Clause:

Clause 1 - Aid in the fruit and vegetables sector: amendment of CMO Regulation

Clause 2 - Aid in the fruit and vegetables sector: power to modify.

Clause 3 - Information provision and promotion measures: power to modify

Clause 4 - Regulations

Clause 5 - Interpretation

Clause 6 - Commencement and short title

There then followed a question and answer session on Clause 1.

The Committee heard that the assumption is that the new FVAS three year programme will continue to run to completion if a new scheme is introduced before the three year period ends.

The Committee heard that if a brand new scheme is brought in to make it more attractive to other sectors it may require new primary or delegated legislation.

There then followed a question and answer session on Clause 2.

In response to Members' queries, the Officials highlighted that it may be possible to improve the existing FVAS scheme while the development of a new scheme is underway, including making the scheme less bureaucratic and to align the scheme with attractive elements contained in EU schemes. There will also be an opportunity to find ways to improve promotion of schemes to attract other sectors.

The Committee heard that the power could also be used to revoke parts of EU assimilated law that are not relevant to Northern Ireland.

Clause 3 Information provision and promotion measures: power to modify.

The Chair outlined an overview of a range of the comments made by the respondents to the Call for Evidence, there were no further queries raised to this Clause.

There then followed a question and answer session on Clause 4 - Regulations

In response to Members' queries, the Committee heard that the powers may seem broad but that any changes to the legislation would be narrow in focus and subject to agreement in the Assembly, which provides a safety net.

Clause 5 and Clause 6

No further queries were raised to Clause 5 or Clause 6.

The Chair thanked the Officials for the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to continue the deliberations on the Bill at its next meeting and to have a closed session with the Assembly Bill Official.

Declan McAleer MLA left the meeting at 10.59am

Declan McAleer MLA re -joined the meeting at 11.06am

Patsy McGlone MLA left the meeting at 11.02am

Patsy McGlone MLA re -joined the meeting at 11.05am

The Committee agreed to move ahead to agenda item 8

8. Departmental Written Briefing - SI the Fair Dealing Obligations (Pig) Regulations 2025

The Committee considered the Draft SI -The Fair Dealing Obligations (Pigs) Regulations 2025, which was laid in Westminster on 13 March and extends to Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted the purpose of the Regulations is to improve transparency and fairness in the UK pig sector and will introduce mandatory written contracts between first purchasers and pig sellers for all pigs sold in the UK unless a seller opts out of having a written contract. They will apply to all new contracts from summer 2025 and existing contracts from summer 2026.

The Committee noted the Regulations also make an amendment to the previous Fair Dealing Obligations (Milk) Regulations 2024 in relation to tiered pricing in exclusive milk contracts which will come into force when the SI is made.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the briefing.

The Officials left the meeting at 11.08am

The meeting was suspended at 11.08am

The meeting resumed at 11.15am

The AFBI Officials joined the meeting at 11.15am

Aoife Finnegan MLA re -joined the meeting at 11.16am

John Blair MLA re -joined the meeting at 11.17am

The Committee returned to Agenda item 7

7. Briefing from The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) on Delivering a net zero nature positive future, supporting sustainable agriculture and thriving rural communities

The following AFBI Officials briefed the Committee:

- Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive;
- Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division (VSD);
- Professor Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division;
- Mrs Nuala McAuley, Director of Finance and Corporate Affairs Division; and
- Mr Pieter-Jan Schön, Director of Environment and Marine Sciences Division.

The Committee heard of the research which AFBI undertakes, which is critical to DAERA's overall vision of Delivering a net zero nature positive future, supporting sustainable agriculture and thriving rural communities.

The Committee heard details of the research and other scientific work across the three key themes of sustainable agri-food systems; animal health and wellbeing; plant health and food safety; and environmental and marine sciences.

The Committee also heard details of the work undertaken in addressing the challenges of Bovine TB and of reducing agricultural greenhouse gas emissions and to improving the water quality in Lough Neagh, as well as the use and integration of new technologies to streamline and modernise local agricultural and food-production systems.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Chair thanked the Officials for the briefing.

Michelle McIlveen MLA left the meeting at 11.55am

The AFBI officials left the meeting at 12:10pm.

9. Research and Information Service (RaISe) Briefing - Community Assets Transfer (CAT)

The following RaISe Official briefed the Committee:

- Mark Allen, Research Office, RaISe

The Committee understands that CAT is a process, for which DfC is policy lead, that allows a community organisation to take over publicly-owned land or buildings for the public benefit.

The Committee heard from RaISe that Development Trusts NI is calling for the development of a new £70 million NI Community Ownership Fund and a Community Rights and Empowerment Bill, to give communities the right to buy and manage resources for local benefit.

The Committee also heard that a dedicated funding resource would be beneficial as Lottery Funding is the only source currently available.

The research highlighted that although Northern Ireland has no specific community asset transfer legislation, the process is possible under existing legislation. For example, the development of the Cushendall Innovation Centre which was acquired by in 2022 via the CAT process.

The Committee commented on the substantial benefits that CAT could bring to rural communities highlighting examples of local successes.

The Chair thanked the Researcher for the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the Raise Paper to the Committee for Communities and to the Committee for Finance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for Communities and to the Committee for Finance to ask if they have undertaken any work or had any briefings regarding CAT; details of the numbers and types of successful projects that stemmed from CAT; and are the Committees aware if Departments are undertaking any work in connection with the development of a Land Fund, such as that in Scotland.

10. Correspondence.

The Committee considered a further series of emails that the Committee has been copied into between Macwaste Ltd and the NIEA Waste Regulation Unit regarding a Haz waste query and Macwaste seeking clarification/confirmation that environmental legislation has been followed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered details of registration for a seminar regarding The Potential for AI in the Public Sector to be held at Queen's University on Tuesday 15 April 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered the 35th Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, which did not refer to any SRs of relevance to the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the report.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department regarding the Publication of the New UK Pesticides National Action Plan

The Committee noted the Plan sets out a five year framework outlining action to minimise the risks and impacts of pesticides to human health and the environment, while ensuring pests and pesticide resistance can be managed effectively.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the report.

The Committee considered the press release regarding the launch on 26 March of the Consultation on Mandatory CCTV in Slaughterhouses, which closes on 20 May.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the press release.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the team prepare a business case for a two day visit and meeting in Fermanagh for Wednesday 4 to Thursday 5 June.

12. Any Other Business

None

13. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on
Thursday 3 April at 10.00am in Parliament Buildings

The Meeting adjourned at 12.30 pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated