



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

## Minutes of Proceedings

8 May 2025

Parliament Buildings, Room 21

**Present:** Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)  
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
John Blair MLA  
Aoife Finnegan MLA  
William Irwin MLA  
Patsy McGlone MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Áine Murphy MLA

**Via Zoom:** Tom Buchanan 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 10:10am***

**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.

None were declared.

**3. Chairperson's Business**

The Chair referred to the online meeting on Friday 16<sup>th</sup> May between Committee Chairs and Convenors to discuss inter-legislature engagement to be chaired by Rt Hon Alistair Carmichael MP, Chair of the House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee. The Chair stated that he would be attending and the Committee would have the opportunity to propose items for discussion at the meeting.

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

The Chair referred to invitations from the Farm Safety Partnership and the Northern Ireland Agri-Rural Health Forum to two events at the Balmoral Show: to launch its new focus on respiratory health amongst farmers; and to a panel discussion to highlight cancer inequalities in rural areas; and lung health.

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

***The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:10am***

***Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting at 10:13am***

**4. Minutes**

The Minutes of the meeting on 1 May were agreed and signed by the Chair to be published.

**Agreed:** The Minutes were agreed.

## **5. Matters Arising**

**5.1** The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance, regarding Community Asset Transfer (CAT).

The Committee noted that following its briefing from RalSe on CAT it wrote to the Committee for Finance asking had it undertaken any work regarding funding for CAT or a Land Fund. That Committee in turn wrote to DoF on the matters.

The response stated that 17 CAT transfers were completed from 1st November 2015 until 12th March 2025 and that DoF is not engaged in work specific to a Land Fund, but it has engaged with the Ministry of Housing Communities and Local Government since the closure of applications to the Community Ownership Fund (COF) in December 2024, to discuss how the fund might progress and look to new delivery models for potential future COF.

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

**5.2** The Committee considered correspondence from the Department regarding the NIEA Planning Update – Draft Step by Step Guidance.

The Committee had previously requested sight of the new step-by-step guide for farmers on what is needed to apply for planning permission.

The response stated that the Department has now provided three separate guidance documents to make it easier for users to navigate the DAERA website and reduce the chances of submitting incomplete or invalid applications. These are:

- Refreshed DAERA Advice and Guidance Overview Document.
- Agricultural Planning Applications: Environmental Considerations Step by Step Guidance for Applicants.
- Order Processing Flowchart to accompany Step by Step Guidance for applicants.

**Agreed.** The Committee agreed to note the response.

### **5.3 The Committee considered a response from the Department regarding Reciprocal International Trade Tariffs - United States of America.**

The response stated that initially, the baseline 10% and 20% tariff rate was imposed on the UK and the EU respectively prior to a 90-day pause announced on 9 April imposing 10% tariff rate all countries, except China. The Committee noted the US is the second largest export market for Northern Ireland goods with exports of £1.7 billion of goods to the US and imports of £0.75 billion in 2024.

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

## **6. Oral briefing from the Department in relation to the Revised Nutrients Action Programme (NAP) 2025 - 2029 Consultation**

The following DAERA Officials briefed the Committee:

- Fiona Dickson Deputy Director Natural Environment Policy Division, DAERA
- Brian Ervine Head of Environmental Farming Branch, DAERA
- Mark Scott Head of Sustainable Land Management Branch, CAFRE
- Rachel Cassidy Principal Catchment Scientist, AFBI

The Officials outlined the main proposals within the NAP review, which opened for an eight-week public consultation on 1 May 2025.

The Committee heard that excess phosphorus is the main cause of water quality problems and the Department's aim is to establish and apply an action programme to regulate farming activities to reduce and prevent water pollution from agricultural sources.

The Committee heard the main proposed changes to the current NAP are: additional controls on phosphorus; measures to help reduce ammonia emissions such as the mandatory use of Low Emission Slurry Spreading Equipment (LESSE); proposals for a focused approach; and the implementation of the action programme including powers of enforcement.

There then followed a question and answer session.

Some Committee Members raised concerns around the impact of the proposals on farmers, especially smaller farms and hill farms, in terms of the cost and practicality of new machinery required and queried if any capital support measures and incentives would be considered.

The Committee also raised concerns that it would add a further layer of bureaucracy and put additional pressure on farmers.

Committee Members also expressed the view of wishing to bring in measures to protect water quality but were mindful that it should not be to the detriment of farmers.

The Chair thanked Officials for their attendance.

***The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11:38am***

***The Sheep Scab Group representative joined the meeting at 11:38am***

## **7. Oral briefing from the Northern Ireland Sheep Scab Group**

The following representative briefed the Committee:

- Mr Paul Crawford.

The Committee were briefed on the contents of the report titled Sheep Scab in Northern Ireland - an update and a Path Forward.

The Committee heard that Sheep scab is a Notifiable Disease, which is widespread in Northern Ireland and continues to cause the sheep sector significant challenges, negatively impacting farmer and animal welfare.

The Committee heard that Northern Ireland lags behind neighbouring jurisdictions regarding research into the prevalence and distribution of sheep scab, and on initiatives focused on developing control programmes. Wales was highlighted as a good practice example.

The Committee heard that for control and eventual eradication, the issue of sheep scab control should be considered as an urgent cross border matter.

There then followed a question and answer session:

The Chair thanked the representative for his attendance.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to enquire what work to date has been completed, or is being considered, to address Sheep Scab in Northern Ireland, and has it liaised with counterparts in UK and Ireland regarding good practice.

***The meeting was suspended at 11:58am***

***The meeting resumed at 12:09pm***

***Declan McAleer MLA rejoined the meeting at 12:14pm***

***The Sheep Scab Group representative left the meeting at 12:18pm***

***The Chair then sought and received Committee agreement to go into closed session to discuss the Agriculture Bill with the Assembly Bill Officials.***

***The meeting went into closed session at 12.20pm***

***The meeting resumed in public session at 12:45pm***

***The Department officials joined the meeting at 12:45pm***

## **8. Agriculture Bill - Committee Deliberations, Formal Clause by Clause and Draft Report**

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

The following Departmental Officials were in attendance:

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

The Committee considered correspondence from NIMGA dated 7 May 2025, reiterating its concerns regarding the elements within the Bill and addressing risks that DAERA had highlighted regarding new POs.

The Committee sought examples of when the discretionary element contained in Clause 1 might be used.

The Committee heard that the impact of Clause 1 is to allow the Department to make decisions on a case by case basis; not to grant assistance for an operational programme if it would result in the budget allocation for the scheme being exceeded, which could then require funds being diverted to it from other schemes.

Another example given was if earmarked funding could be used to the benefit for growers operating outside of Northern Ireland.

The Committee also heard that the location of the PO head office is currently determined by where the majority of turnover is derived but can also be determined by where most of its members are located (by agreement between Defra and DAERA).

The Department is concerned that there may be a situation where a PO headquartered in Northern Ireland with its majority of members located here could have members with large turnovers based outside NI, resulting in funding going to growers outside Northern Ireland. The Officials stated that the purpose of Clause 1 is to close the door on this.

The Chair sought agreement that the deliberations on the Bill were complete and for the formal Clause by Clause consideration to begin. Member agreed.

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

The majority of the Committee were not content with Clause 1 as drafted.

The Committee divided: AYES 1 : NOES 7

Ayes: John Blair MLA,

Noes: Robbie Butler MLA, Declan McAleer MLA, Aoife Finnegan MLA, William Irwin MLA, Patsy McGlone MLA, Michelle McIlveen MLA, Áine Murphy MLA

**Agreed:** The Committee was not content with Clause 1 as drafted.

The Chair asked if the Committee wished to table formally notice of the Committee's opposition to the question that Clause 1 stands part of the Bill.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed not to table formal notice of the Committee's opposition.

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

**Agreed:** The Committee was content with Clause 2 as drafted.

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

**Agreed:** The Committee was content with Clause 3 as drafted.

**Clause 4 – Regulations**

**Agreed:** The Committee was content with Clause 4 as drafted.

**Clause 5 – Interpretation**

**Agreed:** The Committee was content with Clause 5 as drafted.

**Clause 6 – Commencement and short title**

**Agreed:** The Committee was content with Clause 6 as drafted.

**Long Title**

**Agreed:** The Committee was content with the Long Title as drafted.

The Committee noted that an updated draft Bill report would be circulated to the Committee and it would be discussed and agreed at the meeting of 22 May.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to discuss and agree the draft Bill report at the meeting of 22 May.

***The Officials left the meeting at 1.10pm***



## **9. SL1 The Environmental Protection (Disposal of Polychlorinated Biphenyls and Other Dangerous Substances) (Amendments) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025**

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

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Helen Lewis - Principal Scientific Officer of Chemicals Regulation Branch in the Industrial Pollution and Radiochemical Inspectorate; and
- Aoibhinn Corrigan - Deputy Principal in the Chemicals and Industrial Pollution Policy Branch, Natural Environment Policy Division.

The Committee heard the Department intends to make a Statutory Rule for the implementation of amendments to The Environmental Protection Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000; to enable NI to comply with the Stockholm Convention and ongoing alignment with EU Persistent Organic Pollutant (POPs) legislation, as required under the Windsor Framework.

The Committee heard that the SR will be laid before the Assembly under the draft affirmative procedure.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard that the SR would bring Northern Ireland in line with GB.

**Agreed:** The Committee noted that as the procedure is draft affirmative, a final draft SR will come before it in due course and there will then be a debate in the Assembly.

The Chair thanked the Officials for the briefing.

***The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 1.22pm***

## **10. SR- The Farming with Nature Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025**

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

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Zita Hale, Deputy Director of Agricultural Policy
- Devina Park, Head of Farming with Nature Transition Policy Branch.

The Committee noted it was briefed on the SR at its meeting on 10 April, where it heard that DAERA intends to make a Statutory Rule to introduce the Farming with Nature Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 - to provide DAERA with the legal powers to implement the Farming with Nature Package as part of the continued roll out of the Sustainable Agricultural Programme.

The Committee noted that following the briefing, on 10 April, it requested further clarification on a number of matters and it considered the Department's responses at its meeting last week.

The Committee noted that the Examiner of Statutory Rules highlighted minor drafting errors in the SR and a new draft has now been laid.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to support the SR as drafted in the debate, pending the ESR Report.

**The Chair sought and received the agreement of the Committee to note the following items:**

**11. Departmental Written briefing on the Inland Fisheries Annual Report**

**12. Departmental Written briefing on the Proposed consultation on policies for inclusion in the Fisheries Bill**

**13. Departmental Written briefing on Update on the outcome of consultation on a proposed UK-wide fairer food labelling scheme.**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the briefings and agreed to forward any issues of concern on any of the written briefings to the Clerk.

**14. Fair Farm Pricing - Briefing from Assembly Legal Services (Closed Session)**

The Committee agreed that due to the volume of business this item is postponed to the meeting of 22 May.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider the briefing at the meeting of 22 May.

## **15. Correspondence.**

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance, regarding Analysis of 2024-25 Outturn and Forecast Outturn and noted the DoF has commissioned the 2024-25 Provisional Outturn exercise with Department returns providing provisional outturn figure-work and explanation for any over/underspends, being due by 14 May.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the memo

The Committee considered correspondence from an individual, dated 1 May, regarding a potential solution for Lough Neagh using Anaerobic Digestion.

The Committee noted that it had agreed previously that it does not have the expertise to evaluate such proposed solutions and it would forward any received to the Department.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to seek permission from the individual to forward the correspondence to the Department for consideration.

The Committee considered the 38<sup>th</sup> Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

The Committee noted that of relevance to the Committee is S.R. 2025/47: The Direct Payments to Farmers (Cross-Compliance) (Revocation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025, which has not been drawn to the special attention of the Assembly.

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

The Committee considered an invitation to a rescheduled LCJ Lecture on Sentencing Practice in Northern Ireland at 6pm on Tuesday 20 May at the University Ulster.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note invitation.

The Committee considered a memo dated 6 May from the Clerk to the Clerk to the Committee for Infrastructure regarding: A5 Western Transport Corridor (A5WTC) – Qualification Requirements for Land Agents.

The Committee noted that the responsibility of appointing a suitably qualified land agent is a matter for the landowners and Land & Property Services (LPS) who act on behalf of the DfI has no input into assessing if agents are suitably qualified.

The Committee also noted that the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors (RICS) provided information in the response regarding qualifications required for Land Agents.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the memo

## **16. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered the draft itinerary for the Fermanagh visit on 11 and 12 June.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the draft itinerary and for the Committee team to continue to plan the visit..

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request that RalSe to draw up a list of stakeholders impacted by the NAP, to invite to brief the Committee, ensuring that there is an even balance between sectoral and environmental groups.

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

## **17. Any Other Business**

None.

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

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on Thursday 15th May at 10.00am in the Assembly Marquee, Balmoral Show .

***The meeting was adjourned at 1.31pm***

**Signature: .....**

**Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson**

**Dated .....**