



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

13 March 2025

Parliament Buildings, Room 21

Present: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
Aoife Finnegan MLA
William Irwin MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Patsy McGlone 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 10.06 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.

Declan McAleer MLA declared that he is a Director of Loughmacrory Community Development Association.

1. Apologies

Áine Murphy MLA

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chair referred to correspondence from the Chairperson of the Committee for the Economy inviting the Committee to a joint concurrent evidence session with DAERA and DfE officials on 28 May to discuss issues including the provision of telecommunications access for domestic and business customers and the development of related storm protection measures.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to attend the joint concurrent committee evidence session.

The Chair referred to the response from the Department, dated 10 March, regarding an update on the progress of the review of the Fruit & Vegetable Aid Scheme.

The response noted that the review is not yet complete due to limited resources and other commitments. It is estimated that the review is at least a couple of months from completion.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the update.

The Chair referred to copied correspondence, dated 10 March, from Lord Carlile, Chair of the new House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee to Nick Thomas-Symonds MP Minister for the Cabinet Office regarding an update request on veterinary medicines and the Windsor Framework.

The Chair noted that Lord Carlile welcomes the reconstitution of the Veterinary Medicines Working Group and has requested an update on the issues listed in the letter, including, the number of products at risk of discontinuation with no identified route for alternative supply.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Chair referred to correspondence from Deafblind UK, a sight and hearing loss charity, regarding their partnership with Libraries NI to launch sight and hearing information points in libraries across Mid Ulster Council Area.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Chair referred to the Lough Neagh Action Plan update briefing at the meeting of 6 March and sought agreement from the Committee to request a summary table of all the actions in the Plan with an update on the progress on each one.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a ready reference summary table of all of the actions in the Lough Neagh Plan, with an update on progress on each one.

The Chair referred to the Minister's Oral Statement made to the Assembly on 11 , regarding the triple threat of Foot and Mouth Disease in Hungary, Avian Influenza and Bluetongue Virus.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the Ministers statement.

The Chair proposed that the Committee team will issue the Meeting Pack for the meeting of 20 March to Members on Tuesday 18 March, due to the Public Holiday on 17 March

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Pack will be issued on Tuesday 18 March.

3. Minutes

The Minutes of the meeting on 6 March were agreed and signed by the Chair to be published.

Agreed: The Minutes were agreed.

4. Matters Arising

4.1 The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 6 March, regarding the general handling of SL1s and SRs.

The Committee noted that for the majority of SRs the Department will seek to ensure a two week timeframe between the submission of the SL1 and the laying of the SR. In relation to more complex SRs, subject to any unforeseen circumstances, the Department will strive to allow for longer than two weeks on a case by case basis, and in consultation with the Committee Clerk.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

4.2 The Committee considered the response from Aquaculture NI to the letter from the Minister, that it considered at its meeting on 20 February and agreed to forward to Aquaculture NI.

The Committee noted a number of issues of concern to the sector, in the response, since the spread of zebra mussels was implicated in the Lough Neagh crisis in 2023, including that guidance and a reasonable approach to managing the risk from the Department is still lacking.

The Committee noted that applications for fish/shellfish movement continue to be rejected, significantly affecting activities compared to other water users and that despite directing operators to take 'all reasonable steps' to avoid introduction of new species the Department has not specified what reasonable steps are.

Agreed: The Committee noted the response.

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10.07 am

5 – SL1 The Quality of Bathing Water (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Claire Vincent, Deputy Director, Marine and Fisheries Division, DAERA
- Claire Young Principal Scientific Officer, DAERA
- Brendan O’Kane, Deputy Principal, DAERA

The Committee heard the Department intends to make the SR to amend Schedule 1 of The Quality of Bathing Water (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2008, as amended in 2018, to increase the number of identified bathing waters from 26 to 33.

The Committee also heard that there is a statutory system in place for monitoring, classification and the provision of information to the public on potential risks to human health at the identified sites.

The SR will be laid before the Assembly under the negative resolution procedure and, subject to Executive approval, it is anticipated that it will come into operation on 1 April 2025.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee noted the increasing interest in open water swimming, concerns about water quality and risks to public health and were pleased to hear that, due to the increasing interest in year-round open water swimming, DAERA plans to conduct a review in 2026 to consider extending the official bathing season and to conduct out of season water monitoring. The Committee also noted that as part of the review, DAERA will consider amending the criteria to include other sites that are used frequently but by fewer swimmers.

The Chair thanked the Officials for the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Department proceeds to make the SR and will consider it and the ESR Report in due course.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 10.54am

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10.55 am

6. Committee Deliberations on the Agriculture Bill

The Committee commenced its Deliberations on the Agriculture Bill 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 that the Minister has confirmed he will not be closing the Fruit and Vegetable Aid Scheme (FVAS) at the end of 2025; that preparatory work will commence on a replacement scheme to be developed in co-design with the horticultural sector; and that the policy review of the current FVAS is still at least two months from completion.

The Committee considered the responses to these new developments from the mushroom sector, in which the sector welcomes them but states there are still some significant operational issues as to how growers will be able to benefit, particularly for those Producer Organisations with HQs in England.

The following Departmental Officials briefed the Committee:

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

The Officials gave the Committee a brief overview of Clause 1 – Aid in the fruit and vegetables sector: amendment of CMO Regulation.

The Chair outlined an overview of a range of the comments made by the respondents to the Call for Evidence, the majority of which opposed the Clause.

There then followed a question and answer session in which the Officials responded to Committee comments on the issues that has been raised in the evidence provided to date.

The majority of the Committee raised concerns regarding the proposal to make funding discretionary and heard the rationale that it is will give the Minister greater

flexibility in responding to changes in priorities, bring it line with other agricultural support which is also discretionary and will also protect the public purse.

The Committee heard that the direction of travel is for the co-design of the replacement scheme to run in parallel with the existing scheme.

The Committee noted that it will continue with the deliberations on Clause 1 at its next meeting.

The Officials then gave the Committee a brief overview of Clause 2 - Aid in the fruit and vegetables sector: power to modify.

The Chair outlined an overview of a range of the comments made by the respondents to the Call for Evidence, the majority of which opposed the Clause.

There then followed a question and answer session in which the Committee raised issues of concern.

The Chair thanked the Officials for the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to continue the deliberations at its next meeting.

John Blair MLA left the meeting at 11.43am

John Blair MLA re-joined the meeting at 11.49am

Patsy McGlone MLA left the meeting at 11.51am

Patsy McGlone re-joined the meeting at 11.54am

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11.54 am

7. SR 2025/40 The Farming for Sustainability Knowledge Transfer Payments Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

The Committee noted it received an oral briefing on the SL1 at its meeting on 6 March and heard that the Department intended to make this SR to introduce the Farming for Sustainability Knowledge Scheme, which will provide for payments to be made to eligible farm businesses in relation to hosting visits as part of the Scheme.

The Committee noted that the SR was laid on 6 March under negative resolution and it is anticipated that it will come into operation on 1 April 2025.

The Committee noted that it awaits a response to a query it raised around tax seeking confirmation if the payments made under regulations 3(a) and 3(b) will be considered as taxable income to a farm business.

The Committee noted it agreed at its meeting on 6 March that the Department proceeded to make the SR.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it had considered SR 2025/40 The Farming for Sustainability Knowledge Transfer Payments Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and had no objection to the Rule, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

8 SR 2025/41 The Suckler Cow Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee noted it received an oral policy briefing at its meeting on 27 February and a further oral briefing on the SL1 at its meeting on 6 March and heard that the Department intended to make this SR to incentivise farm businesses to increase the percentage of eligible calving events within the Northern Ireland suckler cow herd that achieve a reduced age at first calving and/or calving interval over a four-year phased implementation period.

The Committee noted the SR will be laid before the Assembly under the negative resolution procedure and, subject to Executive approval, it is anticipated that it will come into operation on 1 April 2025.

The Committee were pleased to note that the Department plans to review the scheme after six months and then at two years to address any unintended consequences of the scheme.

The Committee noted that it agreed at its meeting on 6 March that the Department proceeds to make the SR. A Member queried information provided at the briefing on 6 March regarding the percentage of calving events during the year.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it had considered SR 2025/41 The Suckler Cow Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and had no objection to the Rule, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request clarity in relation to information previously provided by officials regarding the percentage of calving events across the year.

9. Departmental Written Briefing - Blue Carbon Action Plan - Publication of Synopsis report and final action Plan

The Committee noted that the briefing paper was not received in time to be included in the main Committee Pack and it had been agreed at the last meeting that only urgent matters would be taken in Tabled Papers, so the written briefing will now be considered at the meeting of 20 March.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the briefing at the meeting of 20 March.

10. Correspondence.

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Finance Committee, dated 6 March, regarding clarification from the Department of Finance on the status of the Budget Sustainability Plans.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the memo.

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Finance Committee, dated 6 March, regarding information provided by the Department of Finance on Capital Easements highlighted in the Spring Supplementary Estimates as a result of an ongoing legal challenge to the award of a framework agreement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the memo.

The Committee considered a memo from the Clerk to the Finance Committee, dated 6 March, regarding NICS Sick Absence Levels.

The Committee noted that at its meeting on 6 March it agreed to write to the DoF to ask, in addition to the Health and Wellbeing strategy, what other measures it is

putting in place, or considering, to preventing sick absence and that a response is awaited.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the memo.

The Committee considered the 34th Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules and noted that the Report does not refer to any SRs of relevance to the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the report.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

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 20 March at 10.00am in Parliament Buildings, Room 21**

The Meeting adjourned at 12.01 pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated