



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

10 October 2024

Parliament Buildings, Room 21

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

Present by Video or Teleconference:

Nicola Brogan MLA

Apologies: Tom Buchanan MLA

In Attendance: Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk
Mrs Gillian Barker, Assistant Assembly Clerk
Mr Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor
Ms Sarah Preece, Clerical Officer

The Chair reflected on last week's Effective Questioning Techniques Session with John Sturrock KC. He proposed that, for increased questioning effectiveness and when relevant to the oral briefings on the agenda, the Committee takes ten minutes before a meeting starts to have an informal conversation about the purpose of the briefings and lines of questioning Members may wish to take.

Agreed: *The Committee agreed to trial this before the start of the meeting of 24 October 2024.*

The Chair advised that before the public meeting next week's meeting would begin at 10.00 am with an informal discussion with RalSe, on some policy matters.

Agreed: *The Committee noted that the meeting next week would go into public session at 10.30am.*

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.

1. Apologies

Tom Buchanan MLA

2. Chairperson's Business

The Chair advised that correspondence has been received from the Assembly's Participation and Outreach Manager, regarding an update on the Older People's Parliament taking place on Saturday 12 October at 1.00 pm.

The Committee noted the motion for discussion:

'That this Parliament expresses disappointment with the minimal mention of older people in the draft Programme for Government; calls on the Executive to place the rights of older people at the centre of the new programme to address issues

such as health, housing, transport, loneliness, poverty and safety; and further calls on the Executive to include affirmative, measurable actions in the new programme that will meet the needs of all older people’.

The Committee noted the invitation to attend and watch proceedings from the public gallery. There will also be a roundtable ‘meet and greet’ on the morning of the event.

Agreed: The Committee would individually contact the Clerk or Outreach Team if attending.

William Irwin MLA joined the meeting at 10.11 am

The Chair advised the Committee he had received a letter, dated 7 October, from Minister Muir wishing him all the best in his role as Chair of this Committee. Minister Muir has requested an informal meeting with the Chair and deputy Chair in the coming days.

Agreed: The Committee noted the correspondence and that the meeting will be organised soon with Minister Muir.

The Chair highlighted correspondence sent to all MLAs from the Food Standards Agency regarding publication of its report entitled ‘Our Food 2023’, which has been laid in the four legislatures across the UK. The Committee noted the report is the annual assessment of food standards in the UK.

Agreed: The Committee noted that a briefing from RaISe regarding Food Policy will take place at the meeting on 7 November 2024.

3. Minutes

Minutes of the 3 October 2024 were signed by the Chair, and agreed to be published.

4. Matters Arising

The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 1 October, in reply to its letter of 20 September, regarding the Grassroots Mountain-Bike Trails Organisation and the Minister's position regarding a policy towards the use of natural wild mountain bike trails.

The Committee noted the Minister has concerns about mountain bike trails being developed without providing the assurance that formal agreements bring to their construction and safe management, including environmental protection and the sustainable forestry management.

It is for these reasons that his Officials in Forest Service have engaged with Grassroots MTB and the UK Trails Project to determine the potential for formal agreements to enable the development and use of the Department's land.

Agreed: The Committee were content to note that the Minister will continue to engage with representatives of the UK Trails Project.

The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 7 October, in reply to its letter of 20 September, regarding the SIB Review of the TB Eradication Partnership.

The Committee noted that the Minister has asked the Chief Veterinary Officer (CVO) to review and examine all matters relating to bTB programme and policy, including the actions contained in the bTB Eradication Strategy and the Department's approach to stakeholder engagement.

The Committee noted officials will provide a written briefing for the AERA Committee meeting on 24 October 2024, including an update on the CVO review.

Agreed: The Committee noted the written briefing on 24 October and that the Minister will provide an oral briefing on the CVO review once it is completed.

The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 9 October, in reply to its letter dated 1 October, regarding the request for an oral briefing

from the Head of the Department's Windsor Framework Implementation Directorate.

The Committee noted Catherine Fisher, the Director of the Windsor Framework Implementation, will brief the Committee on 24 October, and there will be a briefing paper in advance.

Agreed: The Committee noted that the briefing will be on areas that sit within the direction and control of Minister Muir.

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10.14 am

5. Oral Briefing from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs – Programme for Government 2024-2027 and DAERA Business Plan 2024 - 2025

This item was recorded by Hansard.

The Chair reminded Members of the background to this briefing - that at its meeting on 12 September it had agreed to seek an oral briefing on the DAERA Business Plan 2024 – 25.

Following this the Committee received correspondence from the Committee for the Executive Office requesting it to respond to the draft Programme for Government (PfG).

The Committee noted that the oral briefing today will explore the linkage between the draft PfG and the measures set out in the DAERA Business Plan.

The following Departmental Officials briefed the Committee:

- Mr David Simpson, Director of Corporate Planning & Governance; and
- Mr Hugh Quinn, Head of Strategic Planning Branch.

There then followed a question and answer session, which covered a range of issues including the cross cutting priorities within DAERA's Business Plan and how these will be managed across Departments; also, how these priorities will be measured against the Programme for Government priorities.

The Committee highlighted the need for the Just Transition Fund to fully support climate actions in rural areas; the multiplicity of issues in the rural community including mental health, poverty and isolation; and questioned how new Rural Policy will address these serious matters.

The Committee agreed that the issues raised need to be addressed collectively, informed by public consultation and overarching governance on cross-cutting issues, rather than purely 'policy led'

Áine Murphy MLA left the meeting at 10.38 am

Áine Murphy MLA re-joined the meeting at 10.38 am

Nicola Brogan MLA left the meeting at 10.47 am

The Officials left the meeting at 10.53 am

The meeting went into Closed Session at 10.53 am.

6. Response on Draft Programme for Government

The Committee considered their various concerns and issues, which will form the basis of the response from the AERA Committee to the Committee for the Executive Office on the draft PfG.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to contact the Clerk if they had any further matters of concern they wished to be added to the response.

Agreed: The Committee noted a draft response will be considered at next week's meeting.

The Meeting was suspended at 11.19 am

The Meeting went back into Public Session at 11.31 am

7. Departmental Written Briefing – Bovine Genetics Project.

The Committee noted the following paper:

- Briefing on the Bovine Genetics Project.

The Committee noted the Department intends to commence delivery of a Bovine

Genetics Project in 2024. It is one of the main components of the Farm Support and Development Programme.

It aims to deliver improvements in both the environmental performance and productivity of animals in the bovine livestock sectors, by providing farmers with the data and evidence necessary to breed more efficient, healthier animals with lower carbon footprints and lower pollution potential.

DoF has approved a capital spend of £55.6m and a resource spend of £1.6m over the first 10 years of the Project. The capital budget will fund the delivery of the required ICT infrastructure, genetic expertise, genomic evaluations and benchmarking services to deliver the Project objectives.

The Committee also noted that within 12 months of contract award, CAFRE will deliver a suite of Knowledge Transfer and Innovation programmes to ensure farmers have the knowledge to use the information provided by the Project.

Agreed: The Committee noted the briefing.

Patsy McGlone MLA joined the meeting at 11.36 am

8. Environmental Improvement Plan for Northern Ireland

The Committee noted the following papers:

- Letter from the Department dated 27 September 2024, laying of the Environmental Improvement Plan; and
- The Environmental Improvement Plan [EIP].

The Chair highlighted the introduction to the EIP where the Minister states ‘we currently face stark environmental challenges, apparent in many parts of Northern Ireland, including most notably at Lough Neagh. We are witnessing

huge biodiversity loss, warmer and wetter climates and an environment that is infinitely more polluted. It is vital that we harness the growing awareness in relation to these existential issues and implement real and lasting change for generations to come, before it is too late'.

The Committee noted the plan is set out within eight strategic contexts;

- 1) Sustainability
- 2) Global Climate & Biodiversity Action
- 3) Green Growth Strategy
- 4) Northern Ireland Climate Action Plan 2023-37
- 5) Environment Governance & Co-operation
- 6) Agriculture, Food & Environment
- 7) Marine Environment
- 8) Built & Historic Environment

The Committee commented that the new Improvement Environment Plan and Lough Neagh Action Plan both have a focus on addressing water pollution; however, noted that other sectors have a responsibility to upgrade water & sewage infrastructures, to manage and prevent water pollution.

Agreed: The Committee noted EIP and that there will be an oral briefing in mid-November.

Declan McAteer MLA joined the meeting at 11.47 am

9. Correspondence

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 27 September, advising that the Minister has agreed to DAERA's participation in a public consultation exercise on Disposal facilities for solid radioactive waste; Guidance on Requirements for Authorisation [GRA]. The exercise will take place in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and is expected to commence in October 2024.

The Committee noted that there are no radioactive waste disposal facilities in Northern Ireland, but registered holders of radioactive substances in Northern

Ireland need to know what requirements will apply to radioactive waste disposal facilities.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department for further information on any plans for radioactive waste disposal records in Northern Ireland.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 19 September, regarding 'Timing of Free Allocation Rule (FAR) Changes for the Second Allocation Period of the First Phase of the UK Emissions Trading Scheme (ETS).'

The UK (ETS) Authority is proactively delaying making changes to Free Allocation rules until January 2027. It is now intending to consult on the decision to delay changes to the FAR until 2027 through a short-targeted consultation.

Agreed: The Committee noted the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 29 September, regarding 'Publication of the Air Pollution in the UK 2023 Report'. Northern Ireland met the limit values, target values and objectives for all of the monitored pollutants in the country, with the exception of ozone. Only 1 out of the 43 zones in the UK were compliant with this objective.

Agreed: The Committee noted the response and the link to the report in the correspondence.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 30 September, from Healthy Air Northern Ireland, which is a coalition of 9 partner organisations formed in 2022 bringing together health and environmental expertise to tackle air pollution in our region.

The organisation request to brief the Committee regarding the need for action to have a draft Strategy, Act and fund.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add this to the list of potential visits and to forward the paper to the Department for comment.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Strategic Investment Board NI – Investing Activity Report from DAERA, September 2024.

Agreed: The Committee was content to note.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 30 September, regarding the Youth Assembly Newsletter which outlines the work it has undertaken since returning from summer recess.

Agreed: The Committee noted the Newsletter and commended the work of the Youth Assembly.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 30 September, from the Department regarding the Environment Food and Rural Affairs [EFRA] Inter-ministerial Group. The Minister attended the EFRA Inter-ministerial Group meeting on 16th September to establish stronger intergovernmental relations with colleagues from England, Scotland and Wales.

A new and ambitious Terms of Reference across EFRA sectors has been agreed and is now available on DAERA's website.

Agreed: The Committee was content to note.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 2 October, from Fiacre O'Donnell, Sustainability Director, Encirc - a glass container manufacturer and bottler with HQ in Derrylin, and two further premises in Cheshire and Bristol.

Encirc highlighted that it has been a long-time supporter of replacing fossil fuels with bio-methane in the already established gas network infrastructure. As Encirc are an energy intensive business they have identified bio-methane as a key component of their business mission 'ZE30' to produce zero emission glass bottles by 2030.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add Encirc to the list of potential visits.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 3 October, from the Department regarding an update on Air Quality Call for PEACEPLUS Investment Area 6.1. The funding figure for the Air Quality project is €6.5M.

The Committee noted the Department has been engaging with their counterparts in Ireland to develop a cross-border air quality project call, under the PEACEPLUS programme for Investment Area 6.1. The 3 main work streams contained in the call documentation for the 'Air Quality' project are:

- Air pollution from solid fuel burning;
- Transport-related air pollution; and
- Ammonia pollution in agriculture and effects on biodiversity/sensitive ecosystems.

SEUPB [Special EU Programme Body] is facilitating a pre application workshop for potential bidders and stakeholders scheduled to take place on 15 October 2024. The Air Quality Call will then go out on 17 October 2024 and run until 16 January 2025 (13 weeks).

Agreed: The Committee was content to note.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 3 October, which was the written ministerial statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly regarding Update on the Executives Budget Sustainability Plan'. The correspondence included DoF Budget Sustainability Plan, October 2024.

Agreed: The Committee were content to note.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 3 October, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance, regarding unfilled vacancies across the NICS. There has been an increase in vacancies, with the most significant being in the DfC and DAERA.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek its comments on the total number of vacancies within the Department (including those filled by temporary workers), how many new members of staff DAERA has recruited to fill

posts in the last five years, and if the current level of vacancies within the Department is having an impact on service delivery.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department regarding the recent 1000 job vacancies announcement by Department for Communities, and if these posts are sourced from existing HR Connect lists what impact this will have in filling its current vacancies and service delivery.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to copy this letter to the Committee for Communities.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 3 October, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding the UK Shared Prosperity Fund and a replacement scheme from 2025. It is hoped that further information will be made available by the UKG at the Autumn Statement on 30th October, and that the Committee will be updated as soon as possible after that date.

Agreed: The Committee was content to note.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 3 October, from the Senior Assistant Clerk, Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee [DSC]; regarding proposed EU legislation on the welfare of cats and dogs and their traceability.

Agreed: The Committee noted that the DSC has agreed to monitor the proposed new regulation and were content to note.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 4 October, from Séan Finan, Chief Executive Officer of Irish Bioenergy Association (IrBEA). Mr Finan had invited members of the Committee to the 23rd National Bioenergy Conference on Thursday 10th October 2024 in Dún Laoghaire, Co Dublin.

Agreed: The Committee noted the invite had already been forward to them the week before by the Committee Team.

The Committee considered the 23rd Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules. The ESR did not draw special attention to SR 2024/171 'The Hops Certification (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024'.

At its meeting of 26 September, the Committee agreed to put down a prayer of annulment in the Business Office.

Agreed: The Committee noted this will be debated in the Assembly on 14 October 2024.

10. Draft Forward Work Programme

The Committee noted the draft Forward Work Programme and that the Committee will be visiting Mount Stewart Estate next week, to hear from the National Trust Officials regarding sustainable farming and woodland management.

The Committee noted a visit is planned to CAFRE Loughry College, Cookstown on 21 November to hear from various rural groups. The Committee Team will be contacting these groups to organise and plan the visit.

The Committee considered holding their committee meeting at the 2025 Balmoral Show. The Clerk will liaise with the Participation and Outreach Manager on holding their meeting at Balmoral Show.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to hold a Committee meeting at the 2025 Balmoral Show, if this is possible to arrange.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to publish the Forward Work Programme.

11. Any Other Business

None

12. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee is on **Thursday 17 October, at 10.30 am in Mount Stewart, with an informal session from 10:00 to 10:30.**

The Meeting then adjourned at 12.03 pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated