



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

**Minutes of Proceedings**

**12 March 2026**

**Meeting location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast**

**Present:** Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)  
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
John Blair MLA  
Tom Buchanan MLA  
Aoife Finnegan MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Áine Murphy MLA  
Gareth Wilson MLA

**In Attendance:** Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk  
Glenda Doherty, Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor  
Kyle Lawlor, Clerical Officer

***The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:13am***

## 1. Apologies

None.

## 2. Declaration of Interests

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

Declan McAleer MLA declared that he is an executor and owner of a small farm.

## 3. Chairperson's Business

The Chair referred to correspondence from the Minister, dated 6 March, regarding his intention to launch the 12 week public consultation on Rural NI: Our New Approach 2026-2041.

The Committee noted it will be updated on developments in due course.

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

The Chair referred to correspondence, dated 9 March, from an individual regarding Asbestos Contamination at the former Ulster Weavers site on Maldon / Meridi Street, Belfast.

The Committee noted the Minister had referred to the issues during his briefing to the Committee on 5 March.

The Committee noted the individual has queried if proactive monitoring and enforcement has been conducted with a call for Committee scrutiny.

The Committee noted it does not deal in individual matters but recognised there is a wider matter of environmental health.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister and to Belfast City Council, for clarification on the actions taken to address the issue.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Department providing details of Invest NI CBAM Engagement Events. The Committee noted the remaining sessions in Newry, Londonderry and Ballymena will help NI businesses prepare for the EU CBAM and NI CBAM and that there is also step by step guidance and toolkit for navigating CBAM on Invest NI's website.

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

The Chair referred to the debate on the Second Stage of the Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill scheduled in the Assembly for Monday 23 March.

The Chair advised he was unable to attend the meeting of 19 March, when it was expected the Committee would be briefed by the Deputy Chair in advance of the debate. The Chair proposed holding an extra short meeting on Monday 16<sup>th</sup> March so he could be present at the briefing.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to hold a meeting on 16 March to be briefed by Declan McAleer in advance of the Second Stage debate on his Member's Bill on 23 March.

***John Blair MLA joined the meeting at 10:15am***

#### **4. Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meetings held on 5 March and 9 March 2026.

#### **5. Matters Arising**

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 4 March, in reply to the Committee's request for further detail on the progress of development of the successor to the Fruit & Vegetable Aid Scheme.

The Committee noted the Department states that due to its commitment to rollout the Horticulture Pilot Scheme, full work on the scheme is not expected to start until later

this year but some work is now ongoing on the governance structures for the successor.

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

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 9 March, in reply to the Committee request if the Minister would consider reviewing the impact of the Farm Sustainability (Transitional Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 Statutory Rule and the SR itself.

The Committee noted the response stated that the Young Farmer Payment (YFP) scheme and the Regional Reserve (RR) failed to deliver generational renewal but that it is anticipated that the Farming for the Generations Scheme will achieve this, while not focusing purely on financial incentives and that options to extend the land mobility related element are being considered.

The response also stated that the FSP Scheme will continue in line with the provisions contained within the Farm Sustainability (Transitional Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and the Farm Sustainability Payment Scheme (Eligibility Etc) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

A Member noted that the response stated that the previous schemes did not alter the age profile of head of holdings and this appeared contradictory given that the applications to the YFP scheme increased in 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek clarity on the information provided relating to the age profile of head of holding farmers.

The Committee considered a response, dated 9 March, from the Minister regarding concerns at the levels of littering and fly-tipping across rural areas. The Committee noted it had also written to the UFU and all local councils on the matter.

The Committee noted the Minister states he is committed to dealing with the issue using a combined approach of legislation, education, and enforcement.

The response highlighted the challenges posed to tracking fly-tipping trends due to limited resources, and that NIEA is planning to recruit an analyst to improve the

collation of data and identification of threats and trends and DAERA also intends to introduce a Fly Tipping Protocol.

Members reiterated their concerns, particularly regarding the need for clarity on land ownership to determine who holds responsibility for addressing the issue.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request a briefing on the Fly Tipping protocol at the appropriate time.

The Committee considered a response, dated 9 March, from the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) regarding the impact of littering and fly-tipping on the farming community.

The Committee noted the response highlights the difficulty assessing the full extent of the issue due to gaps in official reporting of the issue on private, as opposed to public, land.

The Committee noted the response also outlined the extent and nature of the issue in terms of financial burden; animal welfare risks; and enforcement gaps.

The Committee also noted UFU recommendations including improved reporting; clearer responsibility; use of technology; and public awareness.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to wait until responses are received from local councils before agreeing any further actions.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 9 March, from the Bonds Glen Environmental Group requesting the opportunity to brief the Committee regarding concerns in relation to what it describes as destruction of Sperrin AONB and Special Area of Conservation.

The Committee noted it awaits a response from the Department to a request for further clarify from NIEA on the situation and further details regarding engagement on the matter with Derry and Strabane District Council.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to consider the matter at a future meeting once responses are received from NIEA.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 9 March, from the TST Group a Northern Ireland based logistics company outlining its concerns regarding The Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) (Extension to Maritime Activities) Order 2026, which was debated in the Assembly on 10 March.

The Committee noted it was made aware of the correspondence before the debate.

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

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 9 March, from the UK Chamber of Shipping further outlining its concerns regarding The Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) (Extension to Maritime Activities) Order 2026 which was debated in the Assembly on 10 March.

The Committee noted it was made aware of the correspondence before the debate.

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

The Committee considered correspondence from the UK Chamber of Shipping regarding The Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) (Extension to Maritime Activities) Order 2026, in response to evidence from Officials at the meeting of 9 March.

The Committee noted it included a copy of a letter issued from the CBI in May 2025 to the EU setting out high-level principles ahead of last year's EU-UK summit.

The Committee noted it was made aware of the correspondence before the debate.

A Member clarified that the Committee did not seek further information from the CBI in advance of the debate.

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

## **6. Dilapidation Bill - Committee Deliberations- Informal Decision Making (Clause by Clause)**

The Chair stated the Committee is still in its deliberations on the Bill but will now move towards making some informal decisions on its agreement or otherwise with each clause and any proposed amendments in closed session with the Assembly Bill Office Official.

The Committee agreed to go into Closed session and then return to public session if any queries were to be put to the DAERA Bill Officials.

***The meeting went into closed session at 10:31am***

***The meeting resumed in public session at 11:50am***

***The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11:50am***

***The Public part of this agenda item was recorded by Hansard***

The Clerk gave a summary, for the record, of the discussions during the closed session which covered clauses 1 to 6.

Areas of discussion included:

- Low level dilapidation;
- Fixed penalty notices;
- The serving of maintenance notices;
- The lodging of appeals and the appeals structures in councils;
- The limitations that could arise for councils if definitions became more prescriptive; and
- Mandating councils to serve notices would necessitate definitions to be put on the face of the Bill and this would be a significant policy change potentially requiring executive approval;

The Chair requested that the Bill Officials address the queries discussed in the closed session.

A question and answer session followed:

The Committee heard that the Statutory charges register will hold details of charges held on a property and that the Department is awaiting legal advice to achieve clarity on the matter.

In response to a Member's concern regarding potentially introducing a loophole – with the requirement for a minimum number of directors to be in place before issuing a notice. Officials responded that they have sought legal advice.

The Chair stated that the Committee would resume the deliberations at the next meeting.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

***The Departmental Bill Officials left the meeting at 11:59am***

***The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11:59am***

## **6. Departmental Oral Evidence Session - Departmental Response to the Independent Review of Environmental Governance in Northern Ireland – Final Report**

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Shane Doris, Director of Environmental Resources Policy; and
- Liz Loughran, Director of Natural Environment (NIEA)

The Committee heard that an independent panel was appointed in 2024 to assess the adequacy of Northern Ireland's current environmental governance system and to recommend improvements to enhance scrutiny, accountability, and public confidence. The panel published its final Report in October 2025 setting out 32 recommendations. The Committee heard that 15 of the 32 recommendations are linked to establishment of an independent Environment Protection Agency (EPA).

The Committee heard the Department and NIEA will continue to progress other recommendations in the absence of an EPA, and this will be kept under regular review.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard that the ongoing staffing and resource issues within NIEA has impacted on the progress of some of the actions, but plans are in place to recruit staff.

A Member raised concerns that there has been no cost analysis conducted. Officials responded that it would be anticipated that this would be taken forward once Executive agreement is reached in principle to progress the EPA.

Officials also stated that the EPA would replace the NIEA and so providing an opportunity for cost savings.

Members heard that there is an intention to bring together elements from a variety of organisations into one clear easy to understand map of environmental governance.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

***Michelle McIlveen left the meeting at 12:12pm***

***The Officials left the meeting at 12:30pm***

***The Officials joined the meeting at 12:31pm***

## **7. SL1 - The Climate Change (Just Transition Commission) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 - Departmental Evidence Session**

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

The Committee noted the Department submitted the SL1 and draft SR on 5 February to advise of the intention to make new regulations which will establish an advisory NDPB - to be known as the "Just Transition Commission".

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Jane Corderoy, Director, Climate Change Legislation and Policy Division;
- John Early, Deputy Director, Climate Change Legislation and Policy Division;  
and
- Ian Fleming, Grade 7, Head of Carbon Budgets & Just Transition Commission Regulations Branch.

The Committee heard that the SR proposes to make the Climate Change (Just Transition Commission) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 to deliver on the requirements of section 37 of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

The Committee heard the Commission's operating resource costs are estimated at approximately £150k per annum, with total overall costs of £318k per annum. These costs include the staffing of the Secretariat team (provided by DAERA).

There then followed a question and answer session:

The Committee heard that the Commission would be region specific to Northern Ireland and will ensure that consideration is given to rural areas.

The Committee also heard that it would have a distinct advisory focus but would work with other bodies such as the Office of Environmental Protection and Climate Change Committee.

Officials also stated that all Departments have welcomed the prospect of the Commission and are keen for advice and insights to comply with the Just Transition principles. The Committee also heard that the Commission would have three Members from the agriculture sector.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it was content to support the SR as drafted in the debate in the Assembly.

***The Officials left the meeting at 1:04pm***

***John Blair left the meeting at 1:04pm***

## **8. SL1 - Mandatory Use of Closed-Circuit Television in Slaughterhouses Regulations (NI) 2026 - Outcome of Citizen Space Survey**

The Committee noted the Department submitted the above SL1 and draft statutory rule (SR) to the Committee on 9 February to advise of its intention to make a new regulation which will mandate the use of CCTV in licensed slaughterhouses which handle live animals; keep recordings for 90 days and allow access to the footage for authorised persons to view, copy or seize.

The Committee also noted on 19 February it agreed issue a call for views on citizen space and that Officials would provide a briefing on 19 March when the Committee

will be required to make a formal decision on the SR. The Committee noted the Citizen Space survey closed on 4 March, and no responses were submitted.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed it was content to consider the proposal at its meeting on 19 March.

### **9. Departmental Written Briefing - Synopsis of Responses and Departmental Response to the Consultation on Recreational Fishing for Crabs and Lobsters in Northern Ireland**

The Committee noted that the 12 week consultation closed on 24 December received a total of 83 responses to 4 questions relating to the recreational crab and lobster fishery:

- Registration requirement for Unlicensed (Recreational) Fishers;
- Pot Tagging Requirement;
- Catch Recording Arrangement; and
- Alternative approaches to gathering data on recreational potting.

The Committee noted there was no overwhelming support for the introduction of mandatory registration, pot tagging or submitting catch returns but DAERA considers it to be a useful exercise in establishing contacts and there will be further engagement to ask for a voluntary opt-in to a pilot for pot tagging and submitting catch returns for a few recreational seasons.

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

### **10. Departmental Written Briefing - Mobuoy Remediation Project – Draft Summary Report - Responses to the Public Consultation on the Draft Remediation Strategy for the Mobuoy Site.**

The Committee noted that the 16 week public consultation closed on 2 October with a total of 26 written responses which have been subject to a comprehensive technical evaluation.

The Committee noted the draft Strategy is a 'concept' design completed in consideration of Land Contamination Risk Management guidance and sets out the preferred technical solution to delivering the most effective and sustainable remedial approach to:

1. Protect water quality in the River Faughan and the public drinking water supply abstracted from it;
2. Improve local groundwater quality in the Faughan Groundwater Body;
3. Safeguard public health; and
4. Minimise the environmental impact of illegally buried waste.

The Committee noted an independent review of the process by consultants found that substantial further work is needed to refine the 'concept' design, but that no fundamental changes to the appraisal of remediation techniques was needed.

The Committee noted the draft Summary Report will be published and NIEA then intends to deliver the refined draft, along with an updated cost estimate for consideration and progression to the next stages of scrutiny and approval.

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

## **11. Correspondence**

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 3 March, from Farmers for Action (FFA) requesting that the Minister acts regarding the operation of AFBI.

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

The Committee considered a copy of the annual Drinking Water Inspectorate report on Drinking Water Quality in Northern Ireland for 2024.

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

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 4 March, the Committee has been copied into between the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee and Defra regarding Persistent Organic Pollutants.

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

The Committee considered the Youth Assembly February 2026 Update.

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

The Committee considered the 59<sup>th</sup> ESR Report, noting it refers to S.R. 2026/14: The Bovine Genetics Genotyping Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026, which has not been drawn to the attention of the Assembly.

The Committee noted on 12 February it agreed to it had no objection to the SR subject to the ESR report.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note

### **13. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

The Chair referred to the Committee visit to Enva Fridge Recycling facility in Toomebridge scheduled for 26 March. The Chair noted that some Members have commitments at other Committees in Parliament Buildings later that day and requested that the Clerk is notified as soon as possible of their availability to attend.

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

### **14. Any Other Business**

There was no other business.

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

The next meeting will be held on Monday 16 March at Room 21, Parliament Buildings at 10:00am.

***The meeting was adjourned at 1.11pm***

**Signature:** .....

**Declan McAleer, MLA, Deputy Chairperson**

**Dated** .....