



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

16 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
Gareth Wilson MLA

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

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:06am

1. Apologies

Áine Murphy MLA

The Chairperson explained the purpose of the meeting is to hear from Declan McAleer MLA regarding his Members Bill - The Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill - which requires the Department to make regulations under the Agriculture Act 2020 for payments to farmers operating areas with natural constraints (ANC).

The Committee noted that on 7 November 2024 it was advised that the Bill would be proposed, and then on 3 July 2025 it considered the formal notification of the intention to take forward the Bill. The Committee was also given a brief update on the Bill's progress at its planning meeting on 6 November 2025.

The Committee noted that the Bill was introduced to the Assembly on 16 February and is scheduled for its Second Stage debate in the Assembly on 23 March.

2. Declaration of Interests

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

None were declared.

3. Oral Briefing - Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill.

This Agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The following Member briefed the Committee:

- Declan McAleer MLA

The Committee heard that the policy intentions of the Bill are to:

- Compensate farmers for all or part of the additional costs and income foregone due to production constraints in ANCs;
- Alleviate the burden of production costs in these difficult farming environments;

- Address the reduction in agricultural opportunities for those farming in designated ANC areas; and
- Better promote equality of opportunity for farmers in these regions.

The Committee heard the aim is to restore income from support payments to farmers in upland areas to ensure the continuation of hill farming (where farmers cannot grow protein crops or support pedigree livestock), support low-carbon livestock production, and maintain areas of outstanding natural beauty.

The Committee heard that a 17% reduction in Farm Sustainability Payments (FSP) has placed further strain on farmers in ANC areas who work on marginal, poorer-quality land such as mountainous or severely disadvantaged land.

The Committee also heard about the importance of ANC for breeding of both sheep and beef cattle and that reduction in beef cattle (7% over the past year) is partly due to the ending of the previous ANC payment as lowland finishing farmers rely on a steady supply of animals bred in the uplands. Also, that support for these areas continues in Scotland and with a similar scheme in the Republic of Ireland.

The Committee heard of the potential environmental and biodiversity benefits, for example, wildfires are more prevalent in ANCs due to the build-up of brush and scrub due to reduction in grazing in these areas.

A question and answer session followed:

In response to a query for the Member's rationale in the use of an enabling Bill the Committee heard that to proceed during this current mandate he was advised that the Bill should be as narrow and defined as possible and to use the powers within Article 6 of the Agricultural Act 2020.

Members raised concerns regarding financial implications and the potential to further increase budgetary pressures if no new funds could be allocated. The Committee heard that the Bill is designed to set the legal framework and that the financial element would be subject to Assembly scrutiny via the Statutory Regulation, which would be put out to public consultation.

The Chair thanked the Member for his attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to reserve its position on the Bill and that the Chair would reflect the views and questions from the Committee in his speech in the Assembly debate on 23 March.

5. Any Other Business

None

6. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 19 March at Room 21 Parliament Buildings at 10:00am.

The meeting was adjourned at 10:40am

Signature:

Declan McAleer, MLA, Deputy Chairperson

Dated: