



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

**Minutes of Proceedings**

**26 February 2026**

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

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

**Via Zoom:** Áine Murphy 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 10:07am***

## 1. Apologies

John Blair MLA

Daniel McCrossan MLA

## 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.

Tom Buchanan MLA declared an interest regarding his engagement with the Bonds Glen Environmental Group.

## 3. Chairperson's Business

The Chair referred to the joint concurrent meeting the Committee previously agreed to pursue with the Committee for Infrastructure to take evidence on two bodies that fall within that Committee's remit - NI Water regarding Lough Neagh and also from the Planning Statutory Consultee Forum on planning issues.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to proceed with the joint meeting, chaired by Chair of AERA Committee, in the Senate Chamber on Monday 20th April at 10:00am.

The Chair referred to the Committee for Finance's request for the Committee to reply to it regarding its views on the draft multi-year budget by the end of February.

The Committee noted that as DAERA's Finance Officials are still working through the draft budget with the Minister it has not been possible to organise an evidence session with Officials.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for Finance stating that there is no Committee position on the draft budget at this time.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 18 February, from an individual regarding their formal complaint to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO), in

relation to delay in response to a request for information to NIEA regarding its regulation of combustible waste storage at three Re-Gen Waste sites.

The Committee noted that although it does not deal in individual cases it has previously considered correspondence regarding complaints of odours and waste management at various sites and has raised the issues directly with NIEA.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to reply to the individual advising that it is not within its remit to deal with individual cases but that continued consideration of the wider issues regarding waste and odours with the NIEA remains on its work programme.

#### **4. Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 19 February 2026.

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

The Committee considered a response, dated 9 February, from the Department regarding the Interrelation between the Statutory Rules relating to the roll out of the Sustainable Agriculture Programme (SAP).

The Committee noted that on 29 January it considered the diagrams provided by the Department outlining the legislative landscape for the SAP and a flowchart illustrating how the various requirements, conditions and penalties are applied to the Farm Sustainability Payment.

The Committee noted that the Department will publish the flowchart but will not publish the legislative landscape diagram, considering it to be of limited value to farmers.

The Chair proposed the Department could add a weblink to the legislative landscape diagram from the flowchart to enable those seeking more detail to access it.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to suggest a weblink is provided to the legislative landscape diagram from the flowchart.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 19 February, regarding the previous Committee's concerns in its 2020 LCM Committee report on the Environment Bill.

The Committee noted that the Department states that the current version of the NI EPPS addressed most issues raised by the previous Committee and includes recommendations from the OEP for; a stronger account of the statutory "due-regard" duty; and also addresses cross-border environmental issues and obligations under the Windsor Framework.

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

The Committee considered the response, dated 18 February, from the Minister regarding the Farm Sustainability Payment (FSP) Entitlement Scheme.

The Committee noted that the reply was to matters raised at the meeting of 5 February in relation to the Historic Years Exercise; the effect of additional eligible land as a result of the new land eligibility rules leading to an increase in entitlement prices; and the impact on young farmers following the end of the Regional Reserve (RR) and the Young Farmers' Payment Scheme (YFP).

The Committee also noted that the Minister also pointed out that The Farming for the Generations Scheme, planned for launch in November is designed to take a strategic and holistic approach to generational renewal rather than focusing on purely financial incentives.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to discuss the matter further during the later briefing from the Ulster Farmers' Union and Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster.

The Committee considered a response, dated 23 February, from the Minister for the Economy regarding Support for the ABP Food Group.

The Committee noted that the Minister states that following ABP's announcement Invest NI immediately engaged with senior management at the company to explore the best possible outcome for staff concerned and efforts are continuing.

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

The Committee considered a response from the Minister, dated 24 February, in reply to the Committee's concerns raised at the meeting on 12 February regarding the Isle of Man Government's newly implemented work visa requirements.

The Committee noted the Minister shares its concern regarding the potentially serious implications for the Northern Ireland fishing sector, which is heavily reliant on skilled non-UK crew.

The Committee also noted that the Minister received no advance notification of the changes and has requested an urgent meeting with the Ministers responsible for Fisheries and Immigration in the Isle of Man to discuss the rationale for the changes and seek solutions to avoid any disproportionate impacts on the local fishing industry.

The Committee expressed continued concern at the situation and the need for urgent action to be taken.

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

***The representatives from the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) & Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster (YFCU) joined the meeting at 10:17am***

## **6. Oral Evidence Session - Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) & Young Farmers' Clubs of Ulster (YFCU) on the Farm Sustainability Payment (FSP) Entitlement**

The Committee noted on 5 February, it had considered concerns about the effect of the introduction of the new FSP regulations and agreed that there was a wider policy issue to consider and wished to hear from the UFU and young Farmers about the issues that they are facing.

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr James McCluggage, Technical & Communications Manager, UFU;
- Mr Harry Chambers, YCFU AERA Committee Chair; and
- Ms Roberta Simmons, Membership Development Manager, YFCU

The Committee heard of the impact on the closure of the Regional Reserve (RR) and the removal of new YFP applications after 2025 on the ability of young farmers to enter or progress in the farming sector.

The Committee also heard that key issues are succession planning, the need for generational renewal and access to land for new entrants.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard of the concerns regarding the Farming for the Generations pilot Scheme and that in contrast the previous Land Mobility Scheme was considered successful and that any future scheme should operate independently and on a similar basis.

The Committee also heard that the industry is stagnating due to lack of financial incentives and issues with planning applications.

Other areas of discussion included:

- The potential impact on future food security if new entrants fail to enter the industry;
- The merits of an agricultural apprenticeship programme; and
- The benefits of diversification into areas such as agri-food tourism.

A Member raised concerns about the impact on farmers of The Farm Sustainability (Transitional Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and suggested that the Department should review it.

A Member suggested requesting Officials involved in the development of the Farming for Generations Scheme to brief the Committee on its progress and to also receive a briefing from Rural Support.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request that it considers a review of the Farm Sustainability (Transitional Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to request an oral briefing from Officials on the development of the Farming for Generations Scheme and from Rural Support.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

***The UFU and YFCU representatives left the meeting at 10:58am***

***The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:58am***

## **7. Dilapidation Bill - Committee Deliberations**

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

The Committee continued its Deliberations on the Dilapidation Bill.

The following Departmental Officials joined the Committee meeting:

- Simon Webb – DAERA Bill Team and;
- Mark Allison – DAERA Bill Team

The Committee noted that it will discuss the outcome of the meeting held on 24 February between Officials and NILGA at next week's meeting.

The Committee agreed to start the deliberations at Clause 16

**The Officials gave the Committee a brief overview of Clauses 16 – 20  
Miscellaneous functions of district councils**

**The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in  
evidence on Clause 16 – Information**

The Chair highlighted the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) Article 8 that are engaged in the Bill.

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

The Committee heard that the clause is not weaker in its powers than existing Article 72 of the Pollution Control Order.

**The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in  
evidence on Clause 17 - Consultation with planning department,**

The Chair highlighted the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) that are engaged in the Bill.

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

The Committee heard that the Department would elaborate in the guidance as opposed to an amendment regarding clear emergency consultation procedures for listed or heritage sites.

**The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence on Clause 18 - Power of entry**

The Chair highlighted the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) Article 8 that are engaged in the Bill.

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

In response to a query if there was a need for the power of entry as it is already in existing legislation Officials advised they will give the matter some further consideration.

**The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence on Clause 19 – Fixed penalty**

The Chair highlighted the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) Article 6 that are engaged in the Bill.

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

The Committee heard that options for dealing with repeat offenders are included in the Bill and in response to concerns that penalties are too low to act as a deterrent, Officials stated that the Department would be amenable to considering increasing them.

**The Chair advised there were no comments and issues raised in evidence on Clause 20 – Guidance as the guidance was not available while the survey was live.**

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

Officials advised that feedback on the guidance had been received from councils at the roundtable meeting and that they would work with them to further develop the guidance.

The Committee also heard that it will be statutory guidance and concerns could be addressed through amendments if required.

The Chair brought deliberation of Clause 16 to 20 to a conclusion and advised that the Committee could return to it at the next meeting if Members required further clarification.

**The Officials gave the Committee a brief overview of Clauses 21- 23 - General procedural matters etc**

**The Chair advised there were no comments and issues raised in evidence on Clause 21- Notices and Clause 22 - Appeals**

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

In response to concerns about the consistency of Notices across councils, Officials advised that this will be addressed within the guidance.

**The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence in relation to Clause 23 – Offences: defendant**

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

In response to a suggestion that a daily fine should be introduced for repeat offenders the Committee heard that NI Court Service in practice do not currently administer daily fines.

The Chair brought deliberation of Clause 21 to 23 to a conclusion and advised that the Committee could return to it at the next meeting if Members required further clarification.

**The Officials gave the Committee a brief overview of Clauses 24 and Clause 25 – Interpretation.**

**The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence on in relation to Clauses 24 -Meaning of Interested Persons**

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

The Committee heard that the Officials wished to make the definition of interested persons as wide as possible.

**The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence in relation to Clauses 25 - Other Definitions**

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

The Committee heard that the Department does not consider the phrase ‘building includes any other structure’ to be too broad and is not substantially different from definitions in other pieces of legislation.

The Chair brought deliberation of Clause 24 to 25 to a conclusion and advised that the Committee could return to it at the next meeting if Members required further clarification.

**The Officials gave the Committee a brief overview of Clauses 26-28 - Supplementary.**

**The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence in relation to Clause 26 - Repeals and consequential amendments Clause 27 - Savings and Clause 28 – Regulations.**

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

The Committee heard that the Department was not of the view that gaps would inadvertently created with repeal of some laws.

The Chair brought deliberation of Clause 26 to 28 to a conclusion and advised that the Committee could return to it at the next meeting if Members required further clarification.

**The Officials gave the Committee a brief overview of Clauses 29-31: General Interpretation, Commencement and Short Title.**

**The Chair advised there were no comments and issues raised in evidence on Clauses 29-31**

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

The Committee heard that there will be communications and a publicity campaign to raise awareness of Bill prior to commencement.

The Chair brought deliberation of Clause 29 to 31 to a conclusion and advised that the Committee could return to it at the next meeting if Members required further clarification.

**The Officials gave the Committee a brief overview of Schedule 1 – Fixed Penalties**

**The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence on in relation to Schedule 1 – Fixed Penalties**

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

The Committee heard that the Department is open to setting the penalty at a higher level and that receipts should go to councils and not to DAERA to administer the scheme.

**The Officials gave the Committee a brief overview of Schedule 2 – Repeals**

**The Chair advised there were no comments and issues raised in evidence on Schedule 2 – Repeals**

The Committee had no questions or comments regarding Schedule 2

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

***The Officials left the meeting at 11:50am***

***The meeting was suspended at 11:50am***

***The meeting resumed at 12:03pm***

***The Officials joined the meeting at 12:03pm***

#### **8. SL1 The Sheep Carcase Classification and Price Reporting Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Committee noted at the meeting of 22 January, it agreed to note receipt of the SL1 and proposed SR and consider the policy detail of the SL1 on 26 February.

The Committee also noted that although the call for views via Citizen Space received no responses, a separate response has been received from NIMEA which highlights a number of unintended consequences, including increased costs and reduced efficiency; hygiene and food-safety risks; and an undermining of NI competitiveness.

The Committee noted that views were invited from the NI Sheep Taskforce but to date no response has been received.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Dr Samantha Stewart, Head of Food Security, Beef, Sheep and Pig Policy; and
- Mr Kieran Coghlan, Deputy Principal, Food Security, Beef, Sheep and Pig Policy.

The Committee heard that the Department intends to make the SR under the draft affirmative procedure to introduce mandatory sheep carcase classification and price reporting in Northern Ireland.

The Committee also heard the SR makes classification of sheep carcasses aged less than 12 months and price reporting of the same mandatory in Northern Ireland for all slaughterhouses which slaughter at least 1,000 sheep per week as a rolling annual average.

The Committee also heard that it would ensure consistency and transparency and provide the Department with necessary enforcement powers to ensure high standards.

There then followed a question and answer session:

The Committee heard the rationale behind excluding abattoirs processing less than 1000 sheep per week was that the regulatory burden was considered to be too high for the smaller abattoirs.

The Committee heard that although it will continue to be voluntary in the Republic of Ireland the same standards still apply and it will not disadvantage operators in Northern Ireland.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to invite NIMEA and a producer to provide oral evidence before it makes a formal decision on the draft SR.

***The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 12:27pm***

## **9. Ozone Depleting Substances (ODS) and Fluorinated Greenhouse Gases (F- Gases) Provisional UK Common Framework (CF)**

The Committee noted it first considered the provisional CF on 20 March 2025 when it was briefed by Officials and agreed to return to the matter.

The Committee noted that both F and ODS gases are used in several sectors of industry as coolants, enclosed in products and equipment, and if emitted F-gases can exacerbate climate change and ODS can cause erosion of the Earth's protective ozone layer.

The Committee noted the UK ODS and F-gases Common Framework Outline Agreement and Concordat is already operating provisionally, and the Department does not have any concerns about its operation to date.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it would inform the Department that it is content that its scrutiny of the Ozone Depleting Substances (ODS) and Fluorinated Greenhouse Gases (F- Gases) UK Common Framework is complete, pending any future UK-wide review of the CF.

### **10. Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control – The Developing and Setting of Best Available Techniques (BAT) Provisional UK Common Framework**

The Committee noted it first considered the CF on 20 March 2025 when it was briefed by Officials and agreed to return to the matter.

The Committee noted that larger industrial installations undertaking specific types of activity are required to use Best Available Techniques (BAT) to reduce emissions to air, water, and land via the best economically and technically viable available techniques and the aim of the framework is to develop UK-wide arrangements to support the effective regulation of industrial emissions.

The Committee noted the Standards Council will review, and if required amend, the Framework periodically every three years, or on an exceptional basis in the instance of a significant issue.

The Committee also noted the Framework is already operating on a provisional basis pending completion of scrutiny and finalisation and the Department does not have any concerns with respect to its operation to date.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that it would inform the Department that it is content that its scrutiny of the Integrated Pollution Prevention and Control – The Developing and Setting of Best Available Techniques (BAT) Provisional UK Common Framework is complete, pending any future UK-wide review of the CF

## 11. Correspondence

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the following items of correspondence.

- A copy of the British Wool Annual Report and Accounts for the year ending 31st March 2025.
- A Clerk's Memo, dated 19 February from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding the Spring Supplementary Estimates, Vote on Account and Budget Bill 2026.
- A Clerk's Memo, dated 20 February from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding the Department for Education 5-Year Budget Strategy.
- The 57th Examiner of Statutory Rules report which does not contain any items of relevance to the Committee.
- Correspondence dated 18 February sent on behalf of Belfast Works Connect regarding Local Growth Fund: Sustaining Place Based Support.
- The ISNI Delivery Tracking System - Investing Activity Report, dated 23 February.
- Correspondence dated 20 February from an individual regarding a complaint about a delay of a Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) review relating to asbestos disposal oversight at Lisbane Landfill.
- Correspondence dated 20 February from the Department regarding an Update on Progress of Sustainable Utilisation of Livestock Slurry (SULS) Phase 2

The Committee considered correspondence dated 18 February from the Chair of Bonds Glen Environmental Group regarding what is described as the destruction of Sperrin AONB and Special Area of Conservation.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request further clarify from NIEA on the situation and also further details regarding engagement on the matter with Derry and Strabane District Council.

## 15. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

## **16. Any Other Business**

A Member raised concerns regarding the issue of littering and fly tipping on roads and private land, particularly in rural areas, and its effects in terms of animal welfare; cost to farmers; and environmental impact.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to all local councils to request details on the approach taken in dealing with the issue in terms of raising awareness and enforcement.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister to request details on the Department's approach to addressing the issue.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the UFU to request details of its understanding and awareness of the issue amongst the farming community.

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

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 5 March at Room 21, Parliament Buildings at 10:00am.

***The meeting was adjourned at 12:39pm***

**Signature:** .....

**Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson**

**Dated** .....