



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

11 December 2025

Meeting location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
William Irwin MLA
Áine Murphy MLA

Via Zoom: Aoife Finnegan MLA

In Attendance: James Gilsenan, Acting Assembly Clerk
Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk
Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor
Sarah Dowd, Clerical Officer

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:18am

1. **Apologies**

Daniel McCrossan MLA

Michelle McIlveen MLA

2. **Declaration of Interests**

The Chair 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

William Irwin MLA declared an interest as a partner in a farm business.

3. **Chairperson's Business**

The Chair was joined by Members in thanking William Irwin MLA for his long standing and committed service to the Committee since he joined in May 2007 and wished him well in his retirement.

William Irwin MLA reflected on his time serving on the Committee and thanked the Chair and Members for the kind wishes and goodwill expressed.

The Chair referred to correspondence from Pilgrims Europe requesting to meet with the Committee to discuss delays to poultry-house planning applications and to raise concerns in relation issues to the export of poultry litter to the Republic of Ireland and to planning delays.

The Committee noted the issue had been raised by a Member at the previous meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add it to the Forward Work Programme

The Chair referred to correspondence sent on behalf of Enva dated 8 December regarding an invitation to the Committee to visit its fridge recycling operation in Toomebridge.

The Committee noted it previously agreed to add the visit to its forward work plan

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 4 December 2025.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered an update from the Committee team of the Legislative Overview for September to December 2025 providing Members with detail relating to legislative scrutiny completed and started this term.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note

The Committee considered the Clerks note of an informal meeting with farmers and Ulster Farmers Union (UFU) representatives on their concerns regarding the management of bTB on 2 December.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the note of the meeting; to invite Rural Support to update the Committee on its work; To invite the Northern Ireland Meat Exporters Association to brief the Committee; and to write to the Department for an update on the TB Working Group's recommendations to the Minister along with wildlife actions that were discussed by the Minister last year.

The Committee considered a response from the Minister dated 9 December regarding the OEP Investigation of DAERA, the Department for Infrastructure and the Utility Regulator into Sewage Discharges into Belfast Lough.

The Committee noted to date DAERA has been asked by OEP to action eight specific information requests to supply details in connection with the investigation.

The Committee noted that the Committee for Infrastructure have requested a copy of the Minister's response.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the correspondence to the Committee for Infrastructure.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department dated 8 December in response to a request for detail on the numbers of inspectors available for bee inspection work.

The Committee noted there are three members of staff in the Agriculture Inspectorate trained to carry out bee inspections, as part of their overall duties which will increase to 4- 5 on completion of the recruitment competitions.

The Committee noted the increased resource will be not used to provide additional services, such as routine apiary surveillance, beyond statutory obligations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward a copy of the correspondence to the UBKA.

The Committee considered the Committee report regarding its scrutiny of the Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) for the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Bill.

The Committee noted at the meeting of 4 December it agreed to support the Minister in seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the LCM.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to the contents and the publication of the Report as per Standing order 42A (7).

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department dated 10 December regarding the Waste (Fees and Charges) (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and noted it agreed on 6 November it was content the SR, as drafted, be approved by the Assembly.

The Committee noted the regulations are to be laid by the draft affirmative procedure and the debate in the Chamber will take place on 12 January.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note

The Committee noted that there will be changes to the SL1 process commencing in the New Year designed to strengthen the scrutiny process and increase transparency.

Aoife Murphy MLA joined the meeting via zoom at 10:22am

Tom Buchanan MLA joined the meeting at 10:28am

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:27am

6. Departmental Oral evidence session -SL1 The Sustainable Farming Investment Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Joy Alexander - Deputy Director, Sustainable Agri-Food Development Division; and
- Brenda Cuning - Head of Future Investment Measures Policy Branch

The Committee considered the SL1 and accompanying draft Statutory Rule (SR) that the Department intends to under the negative resolution procedure to introduce the Sustainable Farming Investment Scheme.

The Committee heard that the Scheme will aim to support on-farm investment for farm businesses to improve their environmental performance and business efficiency.

The Committee also heard there will also be a simple online application process with support if required to allow for a quick turnaround of funding.

There then followed a question and answer session.

A Member raised the issue of if the maximum £25000 would be sufficient. In response Officials stated that the aim is to fund small incremental investments and that phase 2 of the scheme will look at larger scale investments.

The Committee heard that the use of reference prices for eligible items will avoid the administrative burden of having to analyse and approve quotes.

Other areas of discussion included: the Departments response to unforeseen circumstances beyond participants control; response to possible oversubscription; intra- departmental co-operation; stakeholder engagement; penalties and appeals process.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Department to make the Statutory Rule subject to the ESR Report.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 10:55am

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:55am

7. Departmental Oral Evidence Session - SL1 Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee considered the SL1 and accompanying draft Statutory Rule (SR) that the Department intends to under the negative resolution procedure to introduce a closed period each year to prohibit the taking of periwinkles from the inter-tidal area during the period 1st January to 30th April, in any year.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Gareth Dillon - Deputy Director; and
- Patrick Smith - Policy Officer, Sea Fisheries Policy Branch.

There then followed a question-and-answer session.

The Committee heard that the introduction of a closed period in response to scientific evidence provided by AFBI to coincide with the peak spawning season and will ensure that stocks are sustainable in the long term.

The Committee also heard that any negative economic impact on the industry would be small as the main export of the periwinkles is over the winter season.

Other areas of discussion included the absence of closed periods in other jurisdictions; protection of other species and the granting of exemptions.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content for the Department to make the Statutory Rule subject to the ESR Report

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11:07am

8. SR 2025/191 The Farm Sustainability Standards (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025

The Committee noted the SR has been laid under the negative resolution procedure and it is anticipated that it will come into operation on 1 January 2026.

The Committee noted it considered the SL1 on 27 November and noted this SR makes miscellaneous amendments to SR2025 No.165 – The Farm Sustainability Standards Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025, the Committee noted it agreed on 6 November that it had no objection to SR2025 No.165 subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

The Committee noted a drafting error came to light which requires an amending SR as SR2025 No.165 that made amendments to Commission Implementing Regulation 809/2014 (Article 74) failed to fully remove reference to negligence.

The Committee noted on 27 November it agreed that the Department proceeds to make the SR.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it had considered SR 2025/191 The Farm Sustainability Standards (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 and had no objection to the Rule, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules. The Committee noted that although it considers Statutory Rules in isolation, it is aware of the complexity of the Regulations and policies farmers navigate on a daily basis and seeks a clear picture of the relationship between the various obligations, grants and potential penalties farmers face.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request an update on the interrelation between the Statutory Rules introduced during the mandate to date.

9. Air Quality Common Framework

The Committee noted as part of its scrutiny of this Common Framework (CF) it received a written briefing in September 2024 followed by an oral briefing on 16 October.

The Committee noted that the Framework covers all relevant air quality legislation which relates to those powers returned from the EU and sets out how the four administrations propose to work effectively together to improve air quality.

The Committee then considered the Departments response to its query regarding what constitutes a “significant event” prompting an exceptional review of the Framework on 13 November.

The Committee then agreed to return to the matter to conclude its scrutiny.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it is content that its scrutiny of the Air Quality Common Framework is complete.

10. Departmental Written Briefing - Marine Protected Areas (MPA) Strategy for the Northern Ireland Inshore Region 2025-2030

The Committee considered the briefing paper and noted the Department has completed the public consultation on a reviewed Marine Protected Areas Strategy for the Northern Ireland inshore region, and has produced a synopsis report and a Marine Protected Areas (MPA) Strategy for 2025-2030.

The Committee noted the first MPA Strategy was published in 2014 to establish and achieve a network of well managed MPAs for the conservation and improvement of the marine environment in the inshore region.

The Committee noted the review of the first strategy highlights the shift in focus from the creation of, to the management of the network and is consistent with the position in the rest of the United Kingdom, the EU and Internationally.

The Committee also noted the Department also intends to outline its plans for the protection of key marine species with the publication of Northern Ireland's Seabird and Elasmobranch Conservation Strategies.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note

11. Departmental Written Briefing - Significant Water Management Issues Report and Consultation.

The Committee considered the briefing paper providing an update on the Significant Water Management Issues (SWMI) report and public consultation providing an overview of water quality of the Local Management Areas (LMA) within each River Basin District in Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted the report is a key development of the fourth cycle River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) which requires a review every 6 years under the Environment (Water Framework Directive) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017

The Committee noted the Department will commence work on developing a Programme of Measures involving cross departmental collaboration and stakeholder input for the fourth cycle plan which will be subject to an Economic Analysis prior to its publication by 22 December 2027.

The Committee noted it will receive an oral briefing in early 2026 on the implementation of the third cycle RBMP which was published on 13 June.

Agreed: the Committee agreed to note

12. Departmental Written Briefing - Consultation on Mandatory Implementation of Bovine Electronic Identification.

The Committee considered the briefing paper regarding the introduction of voluntary bovine Electronic Identification (EID) from July 2026, and the launch on 16 December of the 10 week consultation on proposals to make bovine EID mandatory during 2027.

The Committee noted the Benefits of bovine EID include :ease of use; quicker and more reliable identification of cattle in the event of disease outbreaks; improved transparency and efficiency in supply chains; improved health and safety; and reduction in human error.

The Committee also noted EID tags are likely to be £1.50 to £2 more expensive than the traditional non-EID tags but the Department has stated it will consider financial support for herd keepers and for the Department, capital expenditure of less than £10,000 is required to upgrade the NIFAIS database to incorporate and support bovine EID.

The Committee also noted that key industry stakeholders welcomed plans to introduce bovine EID and were keen it is rolled out at the same time as the bovine genetics project to minimise the impact on herd keepers.

Issues raised by Members included the feasibility of an all island approach to operation of EID tags and incentives to farmers and possible financial assistance once the scheme becomes mandatory.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department regarding details of any feasibility study on implementing an all-island EID system; and details of any possible incentives for herd owners financial support once participation becomes mandatory.

The Committee agreed to go into closed session for the next agenda item

13. Dilapidation Bill - Progress Update (Closed Session)

The meeting went into closed session at 11:23am

The meeting resumed in open session at 12:01pm with the following members present:

Robbie Butler MLA, Declan McAleer MLA, John Blair MLA, Tom Buchanan MLA, William Irwin MLA, Áine Murphy MLA

Via Zoom: Aoife Finnegan MLA

14. Dilapidation Bill - Progress Update

The Chair summarised the actions agreed to during the closed session.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a comprehensive analysis of how the Dilapidation Bill aligns with current legislation, identifying any areas of overlap or duplication; an insight into the balance between inherited ownership and speculative ownership of dilapidated properties; and detail on any other legislative mechanisms that could enable community reuse or repurposing of privately owned properties.

15. Correspondence

Agreed: The Committee agreed to deal with the following correspondence by exception and noted the Clerk's Memo on Correspondence:

- Correspondence from the Department dated 25 November regarding notification of the Publication of the Authority Response to a UK ETS Consultation 'Future Markets Policy'

- Correspondence from the Department dated 4 December regarding the Publication of an Authority Response to 'UK Emissions Trading Scheme: Extending the UK Emissions Trading Scheme cap beyond 2030' consultation
- Correspondence dated 2 December the Committee has been copied into from the Chair of the Finance Committee to Minister Muir regarding the Review of Arm's Length Bodies (ALB) and ALB Pay Landscape Review.
- Memo dated 4 December from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding the Review of Arm's Length Bodies and providing the Finance Departments response to queries raised by that Committee.
- Memo dated 8 December from the Clerk to the Committee for Infrastructure regarding the Office of Environmental Protection investigation into the Department for Infrastructure, the DAERA and the Utility Regulator in relation to pollution in Belfast Lough, noting the AERA Committee wrote to Minister Muir on the matter and requesting a copy of the response
- Correspondence the Committee has been copied into from the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee to Defra regarding the following matters: Persistent Organic Pollutants; Dairy and Additives; and The Marking of Retail Goods Regulations.
- The 52nd Examiner of Statutory Rules Report dated 5 December which contains no SRs of relevance to the Committee.
- Correspondence dated 9 December the Committee has been copied into from Northern Ireland Environment Link's Sustainable Agricultural Policy Working Group (SAPWG) to the Minister expressing serious concern at EFS Higher Level agreements ending at the end of this month with no successor scheme in place.
- A Pivotal Briefing titled: Northern Ireland's multi-year budget: challenges and opportunities.

16. **Any Other Business**

The Chair referred to ongoing concerns regarding the Blue Tongue virus and Departmental communications in raising awareness of the issue and reducing

uncertainty amongst sheep farmers in particular given that the lambing season is imminent.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking details of plans regarding specific engagement and communication strategy with the sheep farming and wider farming sector.

17. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 15 January at Room 21, Parliament Buildings at 10.00am.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:05pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated