



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

2 February 2026

Meeting location: The Senate Chamber Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Aoife Finnegan MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Áine Murphy 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 09:47am

1. Apologies

Tom Buchanan MLA

The Chairperson explained the purpose of the meeting was to hear new evidence relating to SR 2026/1 The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026, which introduces 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 Committee noted that on 11 December it considered and agreed the SL1 following a briefing from Officials who, when questioned on any potential impacts, responded that the ban on fishing for periwinkles for the number of months per year in the SR would have limited impact on the industry.

The Committee also noted that on 15 December it agreed the SR subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules, which is still outstanding.

The Committee noted on 29 January it considered correspondence from stakeholders providing evidence of impact that appeared contrary to the responses given by the Officials at the briefing on 11 December. The Committee then agreed to hear evidence from the aspects of industry, conservation and from Officials and then agree the next steps on how to proceed.

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.

The SeaFresh NI Ltd and ANIFPO representatives joined the meeting at 09:56am

3. Oral Briefing from Seafresh NI Ltd and Anglo North Irish Fish Producers' Organisation (ANIFPO) - Potential impact to local fishermen regarding changes to periwinkle fishing

The following representative briefed the Committee:

- Mr Paul Leeman - Director, Seafresh NI Ltd
- Mr Brian Chambers - Chair, ANIFPO (via Zoom)

The Committee heard that the ban would have a severe economic impact on the industry as customers will turn to alternative suppliers and may not return as the proposed period is the time of year when the best produce is available to gather.

A question and answer session followed and in response to questions the Committee heard that:

- these regulations would place a huge disadvantage on local industry compared to the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom, where there is no closed period;
- due to the abundance of the species, there is no need for a closed period and that the science is incomplete as it based on Strangford lough area and may not apply to other areas due to differing spawning periods; and
- the short notice provided by the Department prior to the ban is inadequate and left no time to prepare for the potential impact.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The SeaFresh NI Ltd representative left the meeting at 10:12am

The Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF) representative joined the meeting at 10:13am

Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting at 10:14am

4. Oral Briefing from Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF) - Impact to the local marine environment from periwinkle fishing

The following representative briefed the Committee:

- Mr Robert Walsh – Officer, NIMTF

The Committee heard that shellfish populations, such as the periwinkle, are drivers of food webs to support intertidal species such as waders and seabirds, which are facing decline.

The Committee also heard that the proposed closed season of January to April will protect stocks and in turn, the industry and is based on the influence of the Irish Sea on spawning seasons, which is different for rest of the UK.

The Committee heard that protecting periwinkles is important, but regulation is also needed for the protection of other species which are hand-gathered, such as oysters, blue mussels, and cockles and that these species will be addressed through the Intertidal Hand-Gathering of Shellfish Fisheries Management Plan (FMP) to be published in 2027.

The Committee also heard that protecting the periwinkle is based on scientist evidence gathered by AFBI and is a starting step towards protecting other species.

A question and answer session followed.

The Chair thanked the representative for their attendance.

The NIMTF representative left the meeting at 10:31am

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:38am

5. Departmental Oral Briefing - SR 2026/1 The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Gareth Dillon, Deputy Director of Marine and Fisheries Division;
- Fiona Taylor, Head of Sea Fisheries Policy Branch;
- Patrick Smith, Policy Officer Sea Fisheries Policy Branch; and
- Dr Carrie McMinn, Fisheries & Aquatic Ecosystems Branch; AFBI

The Committee were briefed on the details of the 2022 consultation and the responses to it that helped to shape these regulations.

A question and answer session followed covering the following matters:

- the level and effectiveness of engagement since the Consultation in 2022 and the Committee also heard of ongoing engagement with stakeholders involved in the FMP;

- engagement with processors - officials stated engagement has been challenging to get but would look forward to having closer engagement going forward and that they also wished to engage with counterparts in the Republic of Ireland on the matter;
- on waiting to regulate the gathering of periwinkles until the FMP was finalised in 2027 – there was no evidence presented that it would have a detrimental impact;
- the lack of engagement and short period of notice of the ban given and that lessons should be learned around better communications; and
- economic assessment - Officials stated this had been done but there were difficulties presented obtaining data due to the unregulated nature of the industry.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

The Officials left the meeting at 11:11am

6. Decision to rescind the previous Committee decision on SR 2026/1 The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

The Chair put the question to the Committee:

Do Members wish to rescind the previous decision of the Committee to support the SR 2026/1 The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026?

A quorum of Members was present and a vote was taken. The Committee divided:

AYES 6 : NOES 1.

Ayes: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson); Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson); Aoife Finnegan MLA; Michelle McIlveen MLA; Áine Murphy MLA; Gareth Wilson MLA

Noes: John Blair MLA

The Chair then put the motion to the Committee:

That the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has re-considered Statutory Rule the SR 2026/1 The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation)

Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and recommends that it be annulled by the Assembly.

A quorum of Members was present and a vote was taken. The Committee divided:

AYES 6 : NOES 1.

Ayes: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson); Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson); Aoife Finnegan MLA; Michelle McIlveen MLA; Áine Murphy MLA; Gareth Wilson MLA

Noes: John Blair MLA

Agreed: The majority of the Committee Members present agreed to put down a prayer of annulment in the Business Office regarding the SR 2026/1 The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

7. Any Other Business

None

8. Date and Time of Next Meeting

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

The meeting was adjourned at 11:13am

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated