



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

20 November 2025

Meeting location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast

Present: Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
Michelle McIlveen 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 10:12am

1. Apologies

William Irwin MLA

Daniel McCrossan MLA

2. Declaration of Interests

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

Michelle McIlveen MLA declared an interest as a landlord.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chair referred to the informal Nutrients Action Programme stakeholder event at the Stormont Hotel on 13 November.

The Committee noted that attendees welcomed the opportunity to discuss the issues with people and organisations coming from different perspectives.

The Chair thanked Members for their support for the event and also the Committee team along with their colleagues from Engagement, RalSe and Parliamentary services.

The Committee noted a draft summary of the event will be provided at the next meeting and Members would then consider next steps.

The Chair advised, having taken advice, the evidence provided to the Committee relating to alleged instances of animal mistreatment at AFBI will be passed to the Department for response.

The Committee noted that Minister wrote to the Committee on 4 November to confirm that he was taking the matter extremely seriously and inspections have been undertaken.

The Chair referred to the Dilapidation Bill and that some stakeholders have mentioned the need for rates reform to accompany the Bill.

The Committee noted that the Finance Minister recently spoke in the Chamber of policy work to seek Executive agreement to elevate Non-Domestic Vacant Rating liability from 50% to 75% and then to 100% to combat the issue of vacant properties.

The Chair referred to correspondence from the Minister dated 12 November regarding the announcement by the UK Government of the £360m Fishing and Coastal Growth Fund Allocation of which £10m has been earmarked to Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted the Minister has expressed his disappointment at the share of funding as not adequately reflecting Northern Ireland's contribution to the UK fishing industry.

The Committee also noted DAERA officials will engage with Defra to seek a greater share of the fund and will update the Committee on any further developments.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite the Northern Ireland Fishermen's Federation to brief the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister in support of efforts to increase the share of funding and to be kept up to date with discussions with Defra.

The Chair referred to correspondence dated 14 November from NextEnergy Capital regarding its concerns at the UK Governments proposal to shift inflation-linked payments under the Renewables Obligation (RO) and Feed-in Tariff (FiT) schemes from RPI to CPI.

The Committee noted that the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero has a Consultation closing on 28 November seeking views on proposals to change how the cost of the three RO schemes are adjusted.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Economy Committee.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 13th November 2025.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department dated 12 November regarding Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) screening of Statutory Rules in response to the Committee seeking information the Department's screening, and details of the guidance available for DAERA officials.

The Committee had noted that no SRs this mandate appear to have been screened in for Equality Impact Assessments.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department dated 12 November regarding SR 2025/178 The Environmental Protection (Wet Wipes Containing Plastic) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 including the SL5 and explanatory memorandum.

The Committee noted the equivalent legislation was signed into law in England 18 November and will come into force in Spring 2027.

The Committee noted it was briefed on the SL1 on 19 November 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee agreed to briefly suspend the meeting at 10:20am

The meeting resumed at 10:35am with the following Members in attendance:

Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson); Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson); John Blair MLA; Tom Buchanan MLA; Michelle McIlveen MLA; Áine Murphy MLA; Aoife Finnegan MLA -via Zoom)

***Landlords Association for Northern Ireland representatives
joined the meeting at 10:36am***

6. Dilapidation Bill - Oral Evidence Session - Landlords Association for Northern Ireland (LANI)

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr Robert Greer - Chair
- Mr Dairmid Laird - Estate Agent and Property Manager
- Mr Stephen Magill - Estate Agent and Property Manager; and
- Mr Richard Smyth – LANI

The Committee heard that LANI believe that the Bill has some merit but does not provide solutions to the issues faced and that in many cases, owners have been unable to obtain planning permission and councils, government and owners will need to work together if the Bill is to have a positive effect.

The Committee also heard that a variety of factors can hold up efforts to bring properties up to standard include issues with water infrastructure; probate delays and family disputes.

The Committee heard that LANI believe 14 days to appeal is too short and that 3 months is more realistic and that councils should have the right to exercise some discretion as the Bill does not provide specific detail what actions will be required by owners.

There then followed a question and answer session and areas of discussion included: whether current legislation is sufficient, costs of repurposing buildings in a sustainable way; pre warning discussions prior to the issue of a notice and issues with planning delays.

The Chair thanked the officials for their attendance.

Agreed: the Committee agreed to invite SOLACE and NILGA to brief the Committee on the Bill.

The LANI representatives left the meeting at 11:20am

The Royal Society of Ulster Architects representatives joined the meeting at 11:21am

7. Dilapidation Bill - Oral Evidence Session - Royal Society of Ulster Architects (RSUA)

The following representative briefed the Committee:

Mr Ciarán Fox, Director;

Mr Curtis Large, Policy and Public Affairs Officer; and

Mr Colin Shaw, Company Director and RSUA Member

The Committee heard that RSUA views the Bill as a positive step towards the regeneration of the built environment and reinforces that responsibility comes with ownership.

RSUA noted that the £500 penalty may not be a sufficient deterrent compared with the cost of carrying out work in some instances.

The Committee also heard consideration should be given to shorten the window for appeals to encourage owners to engage with the process faster and allow councils to enforce compliance quicker.

The Committee also heard that there was a concern that the Bill should not encourage demolition as an easier and more cost effective way to deal with dilapidated buildings. For environmental reasons, repurposing existing properties has a lower carbon footprint than demolition and construction.

There then followed a question and answer session and areas of discussion included: the definition of amenity; concerns relating to potential inconsistency of councils approach when interpreting the legislation; length of time for appeals; level of penalties; levels of council funding and support; and the need for greater collaboration between council and government.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The RSUA representatives left the meeting at 11:55am

8. Departmental Written Briefing - Update Committee on progress of Sustainable Utilisation of Livestock Slurry Phase 2

The Committee noted the briefing builds a May 2025 update on two projects and that discussions are continuing for a third project.

The Committee noted that The Farm2Export project run by Blakiston Houston Estates (BHE) has seen participation from 65 farms separating and transporting over 6,300 tonnes of solids and the volume of biogas produced is 638,000 m³.

The Committee noted BHE has recently taken receipt of a SULS funded mobile centrifuge separator which will be operational after testing in December.

The Committee noted that the Centre for Competitiveness (C for C) project (LUCERNE) is advancing well with preliminary results demonstrating significant progress with the gradual introduction of their SULS funded mobile screw press separator from May.

The Committee also noted that to date, 25 farms have participated in the project resulting in 257 tonnes of slurry solids removed from farms in Mid Ulster producing approximately 6,425 m³ of biogas.

The Chair expressed concern at the delay in agreeing the third contract given that the SULS 2 project is due to end in September 2027 and is a key action within the Lough Neagh Report and Action Plan.

A Member commented on the importance of the project and that the Department should make efforts to upscale it as soon as possible.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek further information regarding the contract for the third company and if there are any anticipated delays that could impact the Executive's target for slurry emissions by 2030

Declan McAleer MLA left the meeting at 12pm

9. Correspondence

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the following items detailed in the correspondence memo:

- Correspondence from the Department dated 12 November regarding the Marine Licensing clause in the Administrative and Financial Provisions Bill providing responses to queries raised at the briefing on 9 October regarding: Activities that include temporary, low-impact, community based events to be exempt from requiring a marine licence; measures to prevent abandoned projects in the marine area; and how proposals for fee charging powers compare to the Republic of Ireland.
- Correspondence from the Department dated 13 November regarding Publication of the Air Pollution in Northern Ireland 2024 Report.
- Correspondence from the Department dated 17 November providing notification that the Northern Ireland Environmental Principles Policy Statement (NI EPPS) which was approved by the Executive on 6 November will be laid.
- The Committee noted Officials will provide an oral briefing on 4 December.
- Memo dated 14 November from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding the Role of the Department of Finance in relation to the NICS.
- The Committee noted the Finance Committee will be briefed by the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance on 19 November on the appropriate use of NICS resources by Executive ministers.
- Memo dated 14 November from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding Revised Outturn and Forecast Outturn - 2025-2026 Guidelines.
- Correspondence the Committee has been copied into dated 17 November from the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (DSC) to the Minister relating to Veterinary medicines supply to Northern Ireland.
- The Committee noted the DSC has asked if the Minister has concerns and requests further information about the supply of veterinary medicines.
- The 50th Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules dated 13 November.
- The Committee noted the Report does not refer to any SRs of relevance to the Committee.
- Notification of the publication of the report titled Statistical Review of Northern Ireland.
- Correspondence from the Department dated 18 November providing an Update on Public Angling Estate (PAE) Co-Design Process.

- Correspondence from Farmers for Action dated 18 November regarding a recent report about the future of farming.

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Clerk would respond on the Committee's behalf to two separate items of correspondence from two different individuals both dated 12 November.

10. Forward Work Programme

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

11. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

12. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 28 November at Room 21, Parliament Buildings at 10.00am

The meeting was adjourned at 12:02pm

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson