



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

23 April 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
Daniel McCrossan MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Áine Murphy MLA
Gareth Wilson MLA

In Attendance: Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk
Glenda Doherty, Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk
Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk
Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor
Sarah Dowd, Clerical Officer

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:14am

1. Apologies

None

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 an interest in the Areas of Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill.

John Blair MLA declared an interest in the Hunting with Dogs Bill.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to the joint concurrent meeting with the Committee for Infrastructure on 21 April, which took evidence from NI Water regarding water pollution and Lough Neagh and also from the Planning Statutory Consultee Forum (PSCF) on planning issues.

The Committee noted that NI Water contribute to at least ten of the actions in the Lough Neagh action plan and that two of these were joint actions between DAERA and NI Water underlining the Committee's previous request that any DAERA updates on the Lough Neagh Action Plan should include updates from NI Water going forward.

The Committee also noted that the Planning Statutory Consultee Forum (PSCF) agreed to share information with the Committees of its internal project into the planning portal IT system to determine where delays are arising and looking at performance across the entire planning system. The Committee also noted that the PSCF raised no objections to Shared Environmental Services (SES) joining the PSCF.

Members discussed the proposed NI Water withdrawal from SoRPI, and a Member requested that the Committee be provided with updates.

A Member also raised concerns regarding the backlog of planning applications.

A Member queried if it would be possible to make it clear on the NIEA Planning Portal when the Statutory Consultee has completed its work and the application has been transferred for council approval.

A Member queried if the Planning Portal could indicate when the Statutory Consultee's work on an application is complete and has moved to council consideration as it would provide greater transparency of the process.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Shared Environmental Services (SES) to enquire if it would consider joining the PSCF.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Infrastructure to inquire if it is possible that the Planning Portal could clearly indicate when the Statutory Consultee's work on an application is complete and has moved on to council consideration.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department of Infrastructure to request a copy NI Water's response to the consultation regarding the proposal for withdrawal from SORPI.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from Abercorn Estates inviting the Committee to the Baronscourt estate, Co Tyrone to see its operation including a Salmon fishery and anaerobic digestion and to discuss matters of concern and challenges it faces including avian influenza and performance of the Forest Service.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add it to the list of potential visits.

The Chairperson referred to the Office for Environmental Protection's (OEP) offer of an informal meeting with the OEP's Chief Scientist, Professor Robbie McDonald, to discuss its report on the Nutrient Action Programme Regulations (2019) Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted that the meeting would be held on 29th or 30th April depending on Members availability.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that Members would notify the Committee Team of their availability to attend an informal meeting.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Department, dated 17 April, regarding the Pollution Prevention and Control (PPC) District Councils Charging Scheme 2026. The Committee noted it has been approved by the Natural Environment Policy Division (NEPD) and is provided for the NI Assembly's information only.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to previous discussions of the issues raised by Bonds Glen Environmental Group regarding the reported destruction within the Sperrin Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty and the adjacent Special Area of Conservation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange an informal meeting with the Group to discuss the matter further on Tuesday 26 May at 10.30 am in Room 30 in Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson referred to a request to brief the Committee from QUB's Centre for Advanced Sustainable Energy (CASE) on its 2023 paper titled: 'Pathway to a Renewable Future'. The Chair stated it would tie into the informal engagement session at Balmoral with the public on Anaerobic Digestion.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to invite CASE to brief the Committee at its formal meeting at Balmoral to tie into the forthcoming informal engagement session with the public at Balmoral on Anaerobic Digestion.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from Minister Muir, dated 21 April, regarding the publication of the 8th Rural Needs Annual Monitoring Report covering the period 1 April 2024 to 31 March 2025 on 3 April 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from ANIFPO, dated 20 April, regarding the postponement of the briefing that had been scheduled at Exploris for 30 April. The Committee noted it has been confirmed that the meeting will now be held at Exploris on 25th June.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

John Blair MLA left the meeting at 10:25am

The Committee agreed to return to the next item regarding the Hunting with Dogs Member's Bill later in the meeting, to allow John Blair MLA as the proposer of the Bill the opportunity to comment.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Department, dated 22 April, regarding the Shaping Sustainable Places Programme Consultation Report.

The Committee noted the report is due to be published on 30 April and noted it previously agreed to a joint concurrent meeting with the Committee for Communities and the Committee for Infrastructure at 10am on Thursday 21 May before the main Committee meeting to receive an update on the SSP Programme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 16th April 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered the response from the UK Environment Agency (UKEA), dated 17 April, in response to the Committee's request for Clarification on Updates to the Environment Agency H4 Odour Guidance.

The Committee noted on 5 March it considered correspondence from DAERA regarding the NIEA Review of Odour Management advising it is not adopting the new UKEA guidance as it no longer incorporates odour modelling or the FIDOL methodology.

The Committee noted the response states that the UKEA considers Odour Pollution Modelling to have limitations and that the updated guidance refers to FIDOL-related factors where appropriate, but within subject specific contexts, but supported by what the UKEA considers to be clearer, stronger methodologies.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 17 April, in response to its request for information on potential Environmental Health Issues at Re-Gen Facilities.

The Committee noted it had previously considered copied correspondence, from an individual regarding Environmental Information Regulations (EIR) cases relating to Re-Gen Group sites and were concerned there may be broader environmental health and public safety concerns.

The Committee noted in relation to the regulation of Re-Gen's six authorised facilities NIEA have found no compliance issues to date and in relation to the ReGen site at Warrenpoint Port, the NIEA has chaired several multiagency meetings which raised no significant issues of concern but will keep the matter under review.

The Committee also noted in relation to EIR responses NIEA has taken steps to enhance processes and monitoring to improve responses times and expects a future improvement compliance levels.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the NIEA to clarify if there was any representation from local community groups at the multi- agency meetings.

The Committee noted the Assembly debate of the draft Climate Change (Just Transition Commission) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 is listed for Monday 27 April.

The Committee noted on 12 March it had agreed that the draft Regulations could proceed to the debate.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Daniel McCrossan MLA joined the meeting at 10:33am

6. Areas of Natural Constraint (Payments Bill)

The Committee considered the draft Citizen Space Survey questions for the Call for Evidence. A Member requested that the survey should include questions regarding financial considerations.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that Members would provide any additional questions they wish to be included in the Survey to the Clerk and it would consider the matter at the next meeting.

The Committee agreed to move to Agenda item 15.

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:34am

15. Dilapidation Bill – DAERA Bill Officials response to Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and Building Control NI (BCNI) submission on Committee clause by clause

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted at the last meeting it agreed that NILGA and BCNI would provide a paper outlining more detailed specifics of its concerns and proposed amendments on a clause by clause basis for consideration.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

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

Officials provided the Committee with an update on the Department's response to NILGA and BCNI submission on requested amendments to the Bill.

The Committee heard that the Department found that some points raised are already provided for either in the Bill or other legislation and that it appears that no substantial amendments are required.

The Committee also heard that the Department requires more time to consider recommendations 1 to 3 in the NILGA/BCNI paper and will provide a response to the Committee as soon as possible.

The Committee heard that the Department has previously addressed many of the issues directly with NILGA and BCNI and are content to provide the Committee with copies of responses issued.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 10:45am

7. Dilapidation Bill - Informal Decision Making (Clause by Clause)

The Chairperson stated that the Committee will now move towards making informal decisions on its agreement or otherwise with each clause and any proposed amendments in closed session with the Assembly Bill Office Official.

The Committee agreed to go into Closed session and then return to public session to put any queries raised to the DAERA Bill Officials.

The meeting went into closed session at 10:46am

The meeting resumed in public session at 12:10pm

The Departmental Officials rejoined the meeting at 12:10pm

Aine Murphy MLA left the meeting at 12:10pm

8. Dilapidation Bill - Evidence session with DAERA Bill Officials

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Senior Assistant Assembly Clerk gave a summary, for the record, of the queries raised during the closed session including:

- **the timeline for Departments response to proposed amendments and the need for it to be received before the end of the Committee stage;**
- **If all clauses would commence at the same time; and**
- **Update on the issue of maintenance notices and discharge of liability.**

The Officials provided an update on the progress of providing responses to the queries raised.

The Chairperson thanked the Officials for their attendance.

The Departmental Bill Officials left the meeting at 12:15pm

The Chairperson referred to the Hunting with Dogs Member's Bill proposed by John Blair MLA due to be introduced to the Assembly on 27th April.

John Blair MLA provided a brief overview of the content and intent of the Bill and stated he would provide further detail formally at the meeting of 30th April.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to take evidence from John Blair MLA on 30 April.

9. Departmental Written Briefing - Consultation on the draft fisheries management plan for non-quota shellfish in Northern Ireland

The Committee considered the written briefing providing an update on the 12 week Consultation commencing on 27 April. The Committee noted that the draft Fisheries Management Plan, an action within the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP), has been developed in accordance with the Fisheries Act 2020 to set out policies designed to restore one or more stocks of sea fish to, or maintain them at, sustainable levels.

The species within scope include brown crab, velvet crab, lobster, king scallop and queen scallop and subject to the outcome of the consultation, DAERA intends to publish the final FMP by the end of December 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the written briefing.

10. Correspondence

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 16 April, the Committee has been copied into between the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee and Defra regarding: The simplification and strengthening of food and feed safety requirements.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered two items of correspondence from Glenoak Fisheries relating to responses to queries it has raised with the Department, regarding Zebra

Mussel Sampling Report for Loughinsholin Fisheries, Kilrea and the impact on proposed fish movement permits.

A Member commented on the seriousness of the matter calling for urgent action as the issue will worsen as temperatures rise.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to clarify which agencies have responsibility in the matter; assurance that all measures are being taken; the rationale for timelines provided by the Department and to request that the Chair joins any meeting (with John Blair who is supporting the constituent) to discuss the matter.

The Committee considered correspondence from Hillside Trout Fishery to the Minister regarding Restrictions of Live Trout in Northern Ireland and the effect it has had placed upon fish farms and fisheries calling for a review of the current regulatory framework.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence from an individual to the Minister, the Committee has been copied into. It concerns a request for clarification on ministerial engagement and regulatory independence relating to the issue of a Regulatory Position Statement permitting the temporary storage of residual waste at Re Gen's Derryboy Road site in Newry.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered the 62nd ESR Report dated 20 April which refers to the Draft S.R The Climate Change (Just Transition Commission) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026, which has not been drawn to the attention of the Assembly.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered notification from Rural Action regarding the launch of the Maximising Community Space Programme to develop more inclusive, welcoming, and sustainable shared spaces in the Lough Shore Marina Centre in Ballyronan on Wednesday 29th April.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

The Committee considered the informal engagement AD questionnaire, noting that it will run throughout the Balmoral Show to inform preparations for the informal stakeholder AD event in June.

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was content with the informal engagement AD questionnaire.

The Committee considered dates for the AD stakeholder event.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that Members would provide details of their availability for the AD event.

12. Any Other Business

None

13. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 30 April at 10:00am in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned at 12:29pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated