



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

27 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
William Irwin MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Áine Murphy MLA

Via Zoom: Aoife Finnegan MLA

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

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:07am

1. Apologies

Daniel McCrossan 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 in Co Tyrone.

Tom Buchanan MLA declared an interest as a partner in a farm business.

William Irwin MLA declared that he is an Honorary Associate of the British Veterinary Association (BVA) and also declared an interest as a partner in a farm business.

Michelle McIlveen MLA declared an interest as an Honorary Associate of the BVA.

3. Chairperson's Business

- I. The Chair referred to correspondence from the Northern Ireland Fishermen's Federation (NIFF) (ANIFPO & NIFPO) regarding the impacts of the current International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) advice for Irish Sea herring on the fishing industry in Northern Ireland which they believe is flawed and will be catastrophic for industry.

The Committee noted that it agreed last week to invite the NIFF to brief the Committee to hear in more detail their ongoing concerns.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

- II. The Chair referred to US Trade tariffs and noted that prior to summer recess the Committee considered the RalSe Briefing Paper titled *US Trade Tariffs: key changes & initial considerations for Northern Ireland* and agreed to revisit the matter.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a further update from RalSe.

- III. The Chair referred to the announcement from the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) that it is investigating DAERA along with the Department for Infrastructure and the Utility Regulator over the regulation of sewage discharges into Belfast Lough.

The Committee noted it will be the fourth investigation conducted by the OEP in Northern Ireland and will focus on whether there has been a failure to comply with environmental law regulating how untreated wastewater is discharged into Belfast Lough and its surrounding rivers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to monitor the investigation and write to the Minister for an update on any actions that the Department is taking and considering.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 20th November 2025.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department dated 19 November providing an update on Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI).

The Committee noted that it had raised concerns about compensation as the current restrictions coincide with the peak Christmas period that will significantly impact flock owners' annual revenue.

The Department's response states compensation is only payable for birds culled at the Department's direction and is not paid for consequential losses caused by control measures, such as lost sales opportunities.

The Committee also noted the Department has no plans for the introduction of a broader financial support package.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

The Committee considered the Department briefing paper on the Environmental Principles Policy Statement (NI EPPS) and noted that following approval by the Executive on 6 November, the Statement was laid on 20 September. The scrutiny period of 21 sitting days specified in the Environment Act 2021 also commenced on 20 November.

The Committee noted Officials will provide an oral briefing on 4 December when Members will have the opportunity to consider the Statement in more detail.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the Department's briefing paper.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department dated 25 November regarding the DAERA Bee Inspectorate.

John Blair MLA and Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting at 10:16am

The Committee noted the Department does not employ dedicated bee inspectors but provides appropriate training to inspectors necessary to meet legislative obligations. Resourcing pressures do not allow for additional apiary surveillance.

The Committee noted the Department continues to monitor risk including from bee diseases, and contingencies are in place to deal with significant outbreaks.

The Committee also noted that Officials can discuss funding and associated support for the International Meeting of Young Beekeepers (IMYB) 2026 in Belfast at their next scheduled meeting with the Uster Beekeepers Association (UBKA) in early December.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further information regarding staff resourced with the training and qualifications specific to bee inspections; to ask how many inspectors they have currently have to maintain the requisite inspections, and how many inspectors do they require to allow for additional apiary surveillance.

The Committee considered a summary of the informal Nutrient Action Programme (NAP) event held at the Stormont Hotel on 13 November.

The Committee noted it was seen to be a positive event and key themes raised in feedback suggested that the two broad sectors can work together and appreciated time spent discussing the issues.

The Committee noted it will return to this issue and consider next steps in the near future.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the summary to the Task and Finish Group and to the stakeholders who attended the event for information.

6. Written Briefing from NIA EU Affairs Manager - Supply of Veterinary Medicines to Northern Ireland

The Committee noted that the grace period for distribution of veterinary medicines from Great Britain into Northern Ireland ends on 31 December 2025 and the briefing provided background information alongside some possible lines of inquiry for the Committee's consideration.

The Committee also noted despite the UK Government expectation that any disruption to supply to be highly limited, the veterinary and animal health sectors have raised concerns over potential impacts and the lack of information around which products may be discontinued.

Agreed: The Committee noted the written briefing from the NIA EU Affairs Manager.

Áine Murphy MLA joined the meeting at 10:20am

The North of Ireland Veterinary Association (NIVA) representatives joined the meeting at 10:21am

7. Oral Briefing from the North of Ireland Veterinary Association (NIVA)- Supply of Veterinary Medicines into Northern Ireland

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Ms Kirsten Dunbar, President;
- Mr Mark Little, Honorary Secretary and Past President

The Committee heard the representatives' views regarding the potential impact to the change to medicines supply from 1 January 2026.

The Committee also heard that representatives from the veterinary and animal health sectors have raised concerns over potential impacts, particularly given the lack of available information around which products may be discontinued when the new rules take effect.

The Committee heard that to market or sell a veterinary medicine in Northern Ireland (NI) from 1 January 2026, businesses must be based in Northern Ireland or an EU Member State. Businesses based in Great Britain who currently hold a Marketing Authorisation which is valid in NI will need to apply to the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD, a government agency) to change the 'Marketing Authorisation Holder to an EU or NI-Based legal entity. There are some exceptions to these rules; and medicines moved from Great Britain to Northern Ireland will also need to be batch tested to confirm products meet required specification before they are released to the market.

The Committee heard about exceptions to these rules for veterinary medicines that have already been placed on the market in Northern Ireland before January 2026 or which may be supplied under two new schemes announced by the UK government (**the Veterinary Medicines Internal Market Scheme** and the **Veterinary Medicine Heath Situation Scheme**).

There then followed a question-and-answer session and areas of discussion included: potential increased costs for farmers, veterinarians, pet owners and other business owners; possible cost variations between Northern Ireland and GB; product licensing and packaging changes; preventing animal suffering when medicines are delayed or unavailable; risks to vaccine supply due to manufacturer discontinuation;

lack of impact assessments; and the lack of guidance and direct communication to the sector. Issues relating to the movement of medicines between NI and the Republic of Ireland were also discussed.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Veterinary Medicines Directorate (VMD) to express the Committee's concerns and to request an update.

Agreed: The Committee requested a copy of a recent open letter from NIVA to Baroness Hayman of Ullock.

The NIVA representatives left the meeting at 11:19am

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11:20am

8. Departmental Oral Evidence Session - December Monitoring Round

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Roger Downey – Finance Director
- Declan McCarney – Deputy Finance Director
- Nuala Hennessy – Head of In Year Financial Planning Branch

The Committee heard details of the outcome of DAERA's internal consideration of the December Monitoring Round and details of the return issued to Department of Finance on 20 November.

Declan McAleer MLA left the meeting at 11:30am

There then followed a question-and-answer session and areas of discussion included: staff movements in 2025, cost comparisons to previous fiscal years, geographical challenges of recruitment, current vacancy levels, and expenditure on agency workers.

Agreed: The committee agreed to write to the Department requesting further information regarding the nature of vacancies; any geographical or grade imbalances; the impact on its service delivery; and to seek additional information relating to agency worker costs. Management of the PEACEPLUS programme was also raised.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

The Officials left the meeting at 11:37am

9. Local Councils in Northern Ireland Feedback on waste/odour complaints

The Committee considered a Clerk's memo summarising the responses from eight councils in relation to the Committee's questions relating to odour control.

The Committee wrote to Councils individually querying the processes they are following on odour complaint assessments as concerns were raised that there was not one common approach to tackling the issue across Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted the responses indicated that much of the processes of investigation are standard as is the concern that self-testing is unreliable.

The Committee also noted there does appear to be some shared concerns regarding duplication of work and communication between investigating bodies.

Agreed: The Committee noted the document and agreed to monitor the situation.

10. Draft Legislative Consent Motion (LCM) Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Bill

The Committee considered the draft LCM for the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Bill which was introduced in the House of Commons on 10 September.

The Committee noted the LCM was laid on 24 November and the Bill will provide the legal framework for the United Kingdom to fully implement its international obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea on the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Marine Biological Diversity of Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction (the BBNJ Agreement).

The Committee also noted the Bill amends the Marine and Coastal Access Act 2009 and the Marine Works (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2007 to align the marine licensing regimes with the BBNJ EIA process in respect of activities in areas beyond national jurisdiction.

The Committee noted that it has 15 days in which to scrutinise the Bill and will receive an oral briefing from Department officials on 4 December.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to seek a written briefing.

11.SL1 - The Farm Sustainability Standards (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2025 (SR2025 No.tbc)

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

A drafting error requires an amending SR to SR2025 No.165. This will ensure amendments to Commission Implementing Regulation 809/2014 (Article 74) fully remove reference to negligence.

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

The Committee considered a proposal by the Department to make a Statutory Rule to amend SR2025 No165.

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

12. Correspondence

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

Agreed: The Committee agreed the Clerk would respond to an item of correspondence from an individual, advising that the Committee is not in a position to provide assistance.

13. Forward Work Programme

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

14. Any Other Business

The Chair noted that there will be a motion on Recognising the Importance of Food Security in the Chamber on 1st December 2025.

The Committee is hosting an informal event next Tuesday lunchtime to discuss TB. Officials will send out the meeting details on Monday 1 December 2025.

15. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 4 December at Room 21, Parliament Buildings at 10.00am.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:43am

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated