



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

29 January 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
Gareth Wilson MLA

Via Zoom: Áine Murphy 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 10:20am

1. Apologies

Michelle McIlveen MLA

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.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 21 January, from the Minister regarding the Department's analysis of the impact of changes to Inheritance Tax allowances thresholds for Agricultural Property Relief (APR) and Business Property Relief (BPR) combined at a rate of 100% which will now be increased from £1 million to £2.5 million.

The Committee noted that the Minister states he will continue to urge the UK Government to fully remove the Family Farm Tax and ensure support is in place for the elderly and terminally ill who cannot plan for the change.

Members were pleased to note the steps in the right direction but expressed ongoing concern regarding the detrimental impact on farmers and called for the tax to be removed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister in support of his efforts to fully remove the Tax.

The Chairperson referred to a 2025-26 Spring Supplementary Estimate Memorandum and Supplementary Estimate, dated 13 January, from the DAERA Permanent Secretary outlining variances and key drivers of spending changes since the 2025-26 Main Estimate and an explanation of spending trends since 2023-24.

The Committee noted that during the year, DAERA has an additional £80.8m Resource DEL allocated. However, this included £63.0m HMT Funding to administer

the Windsor Framework. It had an overall £8.1m increase in Capital DEL when compared to the 2025-26 Main Estimate position.

The Committee noted the Finance Committee have requested a response to them with any issues in relation to DAERA's 2025-26 Budget position by the end of February.

The Committee also noted that as part of its budget scrutiny it will have an oral briefing from the Department's Finance Director.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Minister regarding the first Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) Annual Progress Report (APR) that was laid before the Assembly on 26 January.

The Committee noted the APR summarises progress in implementing EIP actions; and outlines environmental trends through the Outcome Indicator Framework (OIF) and that the Office of Environmental Protection will publish its assessment of the state of the natural environment, including a review of the APR, within six months.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson reminded Members of an invitation to the official launch of the RiSE Programme designed to enhance the social enterprise ecosystem across rural areas, providing training and support to organisations at 10:30am on 4 February at An Creagán, Omagh.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to SR 2026/1 The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 introducing a ban on periwinkle gathering during a specified period, which the Committee agreed to on 15 January, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

The Committee noted that at an oral briefing from Officials on 11 December the response to Committee questioning about potential financial impacts was that the ban on fishing for periwinkles would have limited impact on the industry.

The Chair advised that he has now received new evidence from stakeholders, which was circulated to Committee, which appears to provide contrary evidence.

The Chair proposed to hold a further meeting to hear evidence from Officials and from witnesses on the financial and environmental impact of the ban and then consider and agree the next steps for the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to hold a meeting on Monday 2nd February to hear further evidence.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 22 January 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 22 January, in response to its request for information, in diagram and flowchart format, regarding the Interrelation between the Statutory Rules introduced relating to the roll out of the Sustainable Agriculture Programme (SAP).

The Committee noted the Department also provided details of the primary powers for the legislative basis for the SAP and details of the subordinate legislation already brought forward to date in relation to SAP Schemes.

Members welcomed the easier to understand format of the information provided and requested that it could be communicated online to farmers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request that the information is provided online to farmers and farm businesses.

The AFBI Officials joined the meeting at 10:35am

Daniel McCrossan MLA joined the meeting at 10:49am

6. Departmental Oral evidence session - Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Data Breach Response

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Professor Grace Mulcahy, Chair of AFBI;
- Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer of AFBI;
- Mrs Nuala McAuley, Director, Financial and Corporate Affairs Division; and
- Mrs Jenni Burrows, Interim Director of Digital, Data and Technology Transformation Programme.

The Committee were briefed on the background, key issues and actions taken in relation to the data breach incident at AFBI that occurred in March 2024 but was not discovered until October 2025.

The Committee heard that personal data of 265 individual data subjects, including farmers and 63 commercial or public entities had been disclosed in error within a response to a Freedom of Information request, but that no financial data was disclosed.

The Committee also heard that the AFBI internal Investigations revealed the breach was due to human error and non-compliance with established controls.

The Committee also heard of the mitigating actions and remedial measures undertaken to contain the breach and prevent future breaches and that the Information Commissioners Office (ICO) did not impose any sanctions and were satisfied with the steps taken.

A question and answer session followed.

In response to a Member's query regarding support to those affected, officials stated that a call centre was set up that handled 57 calls over a four week period in the aftermath of the breach and that there has been proactive engagement to offer continued support.

Other areas of discussion included budget provision for legal and staff costs incurred to AFBI as a result of the breach.

The Committee then moved on to the investigation into allegations of poor animal welfare at AFBI and heard that the Red Tractor Inspection found some non-compliance issues that had now been closed out and accreditation was maintained.

The Committee also heard that incidents were independently reviewed on all cases by a senior vet and no concerns for animal welfare were raised.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The AFBI officials left the meeting at 11:13am

The NIEA officials joined the meeting at 11:14am

7. Departmental Oral evidence session - NIEA Planning Improvement Plan

The following NIEA Officials briefed the Committee:

- Liz Loughran, Director;
- Dr Mark Hammond, Head of Natural Environment Operations; and
- Teresa O'Neill, Head of Central Services Unit

The Committee heard the Plan aims to strengthen the Department's performance in responding to planning consultations by improving efficiency, transparency, engagement, and the quality of advice provided.

The Committee also heard the actions in the plan are categorised into five work strands aiming to reducing delays and streamline the workflow process; improve quality and consistency of planning decisions; enhance communication with stakeholders and applicants; increase staff capability and resource efficiency; improve customer satisfaction and trust; and ensure compliance with regulations and best practices.

Other areas of discussion included the role of Shared Environmental Services (SES) in planning applications; and the approach to deal with renewable energy and green growth applications.

The Committee heard that there is an issue regarding vacancies for staff with specialist skills but that it is anticipated that this will be resolved following completion of recruitment competitions and that consideration is being given address the specialist skills shortage through other avenues in the longer term, such as apprenticeships.

The meeting was suspended at 11:48am

The meeting resumed at 11:50am

Members also raised the issue of the absence of an ammonia protocol and the impact on farm businesses and the lack of response from NIEA to queries that are raised by applicants and councils.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

The NIEA Officials left the meeting at 12:17pm

The meeting was suspended at 12:17pm

The meeting resumed at 12:28pm

8. Departmental Written Briefing - Update on the Outcome of the Review of the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act (Northern Ireland) 2016

The Committee considered the briefing paper providing an update on the recommendations on the review of the list of bodies and persons set out in the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016.

The Committee noted that inclusion on the list, carries an obligation to produce and publish an annual report detailing how the body exercises its statutory duty to have due regard to rural needs when considering policies and plans, as well as the design and delivery of public services.

The Committee also noted the increase and broadening of bodies on the list, from 37 to 91, is expected to have a positive impact on rural communities and should enhance public transparency and scrutiny around the process of giving due regard to rural needs.

The Committee also noted the required Amendments in the Schedule to the Rural Needs Act (NI) 2016 to facilitate the change will be subject to the draft affirmative procedure and the Department intends to bring forward the SR proposal as soon as possible.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

9. Departmental Written Briefing - Launch of the Consultation on the Nature Recovery Strategy to 2032

The Committee considered the written briefing outlining the commencement on 20 January of the 8 week consultation seeking views on the Strategy.

The Committee noted the mission and vision of the strategy is to halt and reverse biodiversity loss by 2032 and to have biodiversity restored and regenerated by 2050.

This is to be achieved through actions contained within five strategic objectives: Well Protected Nature and Accelerated Restoration; Reduction of the Pressures on Biodiversity; Sustainable Use of Biodiversity through Nature-Friendly Policies and Practice; Nature Valued and Mainstreamed across All of Government and Society; and Building Strong, Integrated Evidence and Knowledge to Enable Action and Reporting for Nature.

The Committee also noted that the Department will provide a further update once the consultation responses have been analysed.

The Committee also noted correspondence, dated 27 January, from the RSPB in relation to the Strategy outlining its concerns that the proposals within it do not go far enough to restore nature and calling for it to be strengthened.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the briefing.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the RSPB correspondence to the Department.

10. Departmental Written Briefing – NIEA NI Habitats Regulations Report 2019-2024

The Committee considered the written briefing providing an update on the implementation of the Habitats Regulations in Northern Ireland, detailing the conservation status and trends of Northern Ireland's Terrestrial and Marine Habitats of bird and non-bird species, and the main pressures that they face. The Committee noted that the briefing and the report is embargoed until 30 January.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to return to the matter at the next meeting.

11. Correspondence

Agreed: The Chair drew attention to a number of items of correspondence and the Committee then agreed that the correspondence is to be actioned as per the Correspondence Memo.

- Correspondence dated 23 January, from the Department notifying that on 22nd January Defra has launched an 8 week UK wide consultation on solid fuel burning.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note and to request a briefing on the outcome of the consultation in due course.

- A copy of the Loughs Agency Annual Report and Accounts for 2024.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

- Correspondence from the Minister, dated 22 January, including a Communique regarding his attendance and matter discussed at Environment Food and Rural Affairs (EFRA) Interministerial Group meeting on 24 November 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

- A Clerk's Memo, dated 23 January, from the Clerk to Public Accounts Committee (PAC) regarding the Consultation on 'Rethinking Our Resources: Northern Ireland Resources and Waste Management Strategy' advising of the

decision to pause the commencement of its joint waste inquiry until after the public consultation closes on 6 April 2026; and a request to keep the PAC informed of its consideration of the draft Resources and Waste Management Strategy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to keep the PAC informed of its consideration of the matter.

- Correspondence dated 23 January; Committee has been copied into between the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee and Defra regarding Persistent Organic Pollutants.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

- An update dated 26 January regarding the Youth Assembly plenary, at which they agreed their top three issues for this mandate: Health, Rights and Equality and Education.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

- Correspondence dated 22 January, from the RSPB regarding the new land eligibility rules for the Farm Sustainability Payment stating that whilst it welcomes this development the RSPB believe there remains limited incentive for farmers to actively manage, create or restore these newly eligible areas.

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

- Correspondence from BioAdvice, Omagh outlining concerns regarding DAERA's stakeholder engagement with stakeholders in the development of biomethane policy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the correspondence to the Department for comment.

- The Office of the NI Executive in Brussels Report October to December 2025.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note

12. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

13. Any Other Business

There was no other business.

14. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Monday 2 February at the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings at 9:30am.

The Committee agreed to go into closed session to receive an update on the Summary of Evidence for the Dilapidation Bill and that the meeting would adjourn after that session without returning to public session.

The Committee went into closed session at 12:36pm

The meeting was adjourned at 12:47pm

Signature:

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated