



# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

## Minutes of Proceedings

**15 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  
Áine Murphy MLA  
Daniel McCrossan MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Gareth Wilson MLA

**In Attendance:** Dr Janice Thompson, Assembly Clerk  
Nick Faulkner, Assistant Assembly Clerk  
Michael Greer, Clerical Supervisor  
Sarah Dowd, Clerical Officer  
Kyle Lawlor, Clerical Officer

***The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:09am chaired by the Deputy Chairperson in the absence of the Chairperson.***

### **1. Apologies**

None.

### **2. Declaration of Interests**

The Deputy 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 Deputy Chairperson welcomed Gareth Wilson MLA to the Committee.

Gareth Wilson MLA expressed his gratitude for the warm welcome and Members wished him well and paid tribute to Willaim Irwin MLA for his service to the Committee.

The Deputy Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Assembly Engagement Team, regarding the Balmoral Show which will be held from 13 to 16 May requesting confirmation, by 30 January, if the Committee is content to participate again this year.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to return to discuss the matter later in the meeting once the Chair had arrived.

The Deputy Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 13 December, from Castlewellan Blackface Sheep Breeders regarding the effects of Bluetongue Virus restrictions on Hill Farmers in the Mourne and Slieve Croob Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty that may result in loss of income for sheep breeders and possible animal welfare issues.

The Committee noted that on 8 January Minister Muir announced financial support for the pre-movement testing of high-risk animals out of the current Bluetongue Virus Temporary Control Zone may have had some impact on farmers affected.

A Member expressed concern regarding the immediate financial impact on sheep farmers and Marts and the lack of compensation and requested that the Department provide regular updates on the matter.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department requesting regular updates.

The Deputy Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 22 December 2025, from the RSPB providing its assessment of progress made in protecting nature and climate in Northern Ireland in 2025 and its views on what the Department's priorities should be for 2026.

The Deputy Chairperson highlighted that the RSPB has offered to host the Committee and noted that Committee held its meeting at the RSPB Window on Wildlife Centre on the shores of Belfast Lough early in 2025 and also had a briefing from the RSPB at Lough Erne in June.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to add the RSPB to the list of possible meeting and visit venues.

The Deputy Chairperson referred to the written statement from the Finance Minister and the subsequent oral statement made in the Chamber on Monday 12 January regarding his proposals for the draft multi-year Budget for 2026–29/30.

The Committee noted the Executive needs to first agree DAERA's budget and then the DAERA Finance Director will brief the Committee on the Budget exercise as part of its scrutiny.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the statements and to take a briefing from the DAERA Finance Director in due course.

***Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting at 10:19am***

#### **4. Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 11 December 2025.

#### **5. Matters Arising**

The Committee considered the response, dated 8 January, from the Minister in reply to a query raised during his briefing on 4 December, regarding the genotyping scheme.

The Committee noted The Irish Cattle Breeding Federation have advised that approximately 50% of breeding cattle herds (dairy and beef), have enrolled in the National Genotyping Programme in the Republic of Ireland.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response, dated 10 December, from the Department regarding geographical and grade distribution of current staff vacancies within DAERA and associated agency staff costs.

The Committee noted that agency staff costs for the period 1 April 2025 to 31 October 2025 stands at £9.5m.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 15 December 2025, regarding Blue Tongue virus providing a timeline of events and actions taken following the detection of the virus on 28 November 2025, which resulted in the imposition of the Temporary Control Zone.

The Committee noted that resources and capacity to address the outbreak will be kept under continual review by the Department and communications with

stakeholders and engagement with counterparts in the Republic of Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom continues.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 6 January, in reply to its request for details on any actions undertaken concerning the impact of Bluetongue virus (BTv) on the sheep sector.

The Committee noted that from 19 December, movement of animals within the BTv Temporary Control Zone were permitted, subject to additional requirements for high-risk animals, and that sheep may move under licence without testing, except breeding males which must have a negative PCR test before a movement licence is granted.

The Committee noted that updates have been communicated through a press release, stakeholder briefings and updates to the Departmental website.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a Departmental Update on Progress of Sustainable Utilisation of Livestock Slurry (SULS) Phase 2.

The Committee noted a delay in planning approval for the third suppliers development has hindered efforts to sign its contract to commence its SULS project but the contract is now in the finalisation stage.

The Department states that the project end date for all suppliers has now been extended from September 2027 to September 2028, with no change in the maximum funding of £4m for each supplier.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 6 January, to queries raised when the Committee considered a written briefing regarding the

Consultation on Mandatory Implementation of Bovine Electronic Identification (EID) on 11 December.

The Committee noted the response provided further clarification regarding if EID tags will be interoperable with systems outside this jurisdiction; if a feasibility study on implementing an all-island EID system was considered; and if any financial incentives and support is being offered to herd keepers.

**Agreed:** The Committee were content with the replies to its queries and agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 16 December 2025, it was copied into from Minister Muir to the Chair of the Committee for Finance regarding the review of Arm's-Length Bodies (ALBs) and the ALB Pay Landscape Review.

The Committee noted the Minister states DAERA is engaged with Department of Finance in relation to both reviews and that a number of its ALBs already make use of shared services and will consider further opportunities for efficiencies.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

*The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:26am*

## **6. Departmental Oral evidence session - The Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) Order 2026**

*This agenda item was recorded by Hansard*

The Committee noted that after its initial laying, the Delegated Powers and Law Reform Committee in the Scottish Parliament identified two minor drafting errors and an amended version of the Order was re-laid on 17 December and shared with the Committee on 18 December 2025.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Richard Coey, Deputy Director Emissions Trading Scheme, Carbon Pricing & Windsor Framework
- Anna McMahon, Head of UK Emissions Trading Scheme Branch

- Mairead O'Connor, Principal Scientific Officer, Emissions Trading & Business Support, NIEA

The Committee noted the purpose of the draft Order is to make technical amendments to the Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme Order 2020, which established the UK Emissions Trading Scheme. It makes technical changes to the free allocation calculations for the next allocation period from 2027, while also setting out the pathway to further reforms aligned with the introduction of the UK Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism in 2027. There then followed a question and answer session.

In response to a query as to how the drafting errors arose, Officials apologised for the minor errors and assured the Committee that it will not result in a delay of the debate in the Assembly on 16 February.

The Committee heard that the aim of the UK ETS is to encourage decarbonisation but that does come at a financial cost to industry but that the Order will not significantly alter the financial impact on Northern Ireland business, which is currently estimated to cost £15million per year. The Committee also heard that since 2021 the UK ETS has raised £19 billion for the UK Treasury.

In response to a Member's query regarding NIEA resources, officials advised that sufficient resources are in place at present to deal with the UK ETS and it can call upon the support and knowledge of regulatory bodies in other jurisdictions if required.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

***The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 10:48am***

## **7. Dilapidation Bill – Update on Summary of Evidence (Closed Session)**

The Committee agreed to go into closed session to receive a progress update on the Dilapidation Bill from the Aoibheann Baker, Bill Office Clerk.

***The Meeting went into closed session at 10:48am***

***Aine Murphy MLA joined the meeting at 10:49am***

***The Chairperson joined the meeting at 11:12am***

***Daniel McCrossan MLA left the meeting at 12:12pm***

***The Meeting resumed in open session at 12:15pm***

The Chair highlighted the useful discussions with the Bill Office during the closed session.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to publish the redacted Citizen Space Responses.

## **8. SR 2026/1 The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Committee noted it received an oral briefing on the SL1 on 11 December 2025 and heard that the Department intended to make this SR to introduce a closed period each year to prohibit the taking of periwinkles from the inter-tidal area during the period 1 January to 30 April, in any year.

The Committee noted there have been no changes to the policy content since the SL1 was submitted and it will be laid under the negative resolution procedure. Subject to Executive approval, it is anticipated that it will come into operation on 6 February 2026.

**Agreed:** The Committee considered SR 2026/1 The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and had no objection to the Rule, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

## **9. 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 from the Department dated 11 December regarding the 8 week UK-Wide Consultation on Contractual Relationships in the UK Combinable Crops Sector which launched on 10 December and will close on 4 February.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

- Correspondence from the Department dated 18 December regarding the Public Consultation for the Significant Water Management Issues (SWMI) Report 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

- Correspondence from the Department dated 18 December regarding The Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) (Extension to Maritime Activities) Order 2026.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

- Correspondence from the Department dated 19 December regarding The Plant Varieties Act (Amendment) Regulations 2026.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

- Correspondence from the Department dated 9 January regarding the launch on 15 January of 12 week consultation on The NI Resources and Waste Management Strategy.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

- A memo dated 11 December from the Clerk to the Committee for Economy regarding the EU Industrial Emissions Directive.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

- A memo dated 11 December from the Clerk to the Public Accounts Committee regarding its 'Primacy' over NIAO reports published up to 12 December 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

- Correspondence from the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (DSC) dated 12 December regarding Veterinary medicines supply to Northern Ireland with a request to be kept informed of any scrutiny undertaken by the Committee.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to update the DSC as appropriate.

- A memo from the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (DSC) dated 9 January regarding Regulation establishing the Union Customs Code and the European Union Customs Authority and repealing Regulation (EU) No 952/2013.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

- Correspondence the Committee has been copied into from the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee to Defra advising it is content to draw to a close scrutiny on the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

- Correspondence the Committee has been copied into between the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee and Defra on the following matters: Persistent organic pollutants; Veterinary medicine supply in Northern Ireland; and Marking of Retail Goods Regulations 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

- A copy of the Climate Change Committee (CCC) – Annual Report and Accounts 2024/25.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

- The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission E-Newsletter December 2025.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

- A copy of the initial response from the Construction Employers Federation to the consultation proposals for the draft multiyear Budget for 2026–29/30.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

- Christmas greeting from the Belfast Harbour.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

- Notification of the Outscape 2026 Conference on 'Shaping Green and Blue Spaces' which will be held at Edenmore Golf and Country Club, Magheralin on 5 March.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

- An invitation to Rural Health and Wealth Event on Monday 26 January in Room 115 from 1pm-3pm focusing on the links between rural healthcare and the economy.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

- The 53rd Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note.

## **10. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

**Agreed:** The Committee 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 22 January at Room 21, Parliament Buildings at 10.00am.

***The meeting was adjourned at 12:21pm***

**Signature:** .....

**Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson**

**Dated** .....