Northern Ireland Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

19 February 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
Kyle Lawlor, Clerical Officer

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:09am

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.

Tom Buchanan MLA declared an interest in Agenda Item 6 as he had recently met representatives from The Foyle Association of Salmon and Trout Anglers (FASTA).

Daniel McCrossan MLA declared an interest in Agenda Item 6 as he has recently met with representatives of FASTA.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to correspondence dated 10 February from Farmers for Action (FFA) requesting a formal meeting with the Committee to discuss what it describes as a UK-Wide Crisis Build-up and details of its campaign to raise awareness.

The Committee noted its previous correspondence issued to FFA, dated 4 June 2025, summarising its due diligence on the FFA Draft Farm Welfare Bill Proposals and stating that with the legal advice received from Assembly Legal Services, the Committee had concluded its work on the matter.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the FFA acknowledging the issues raised.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 9 February, from the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) regarding the launch in Parliament Buildings on 24 June of its first progress report on the Environmental Improvement Plan (EIP) for

Northern Ireland. The Committee noted the Chair has been asked to sponsor the event in his capacity as Chair of the AERA Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the OEP to advise that the Chair will sponsor the event.

The Chairperson referred to a briefing note from Mineral Products Association Northern Ireland (MPA) outlining risks and challenges to local businesses due to its obligations under both the UK Emissions Border Adjustment Mechanism (EBAM) and the EU Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange a briefing from MPA to hear its concerns.

The Chair referred to the Areas of Natural Constraint (Payments) Bill that was introduced in the Assembly on 6 February.

The Committee noted it considered the formal notification to the Committee of the intention of the Deputy Chair, Declan McAleer MLA to bring forward the Members Bill at the meeting on 3 July. The Deputy Chair gave Members a summary of the content and intent of the Bill.

Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting at 10:14am

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 12 February 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a response from the Minister Department, dated 13 February regarding the family farm tax.

The Committee noted it wrote to the Minister in support of his position in urging the UK Government to fully remove the changes planned for April 2026.

The Committee noted in response to concerns about the per acre land valuation used by DAERA in the analysis, the Department considers the £21,000/acre valuation to cover all agricultural and business property on a farm as valid considering recent land price data reports.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 12 February, providing a breakdown of the backlog of outstanding planning consultations by Council area, as requested.

Some Members raised concerns regarding a lack of response to recent requests for information and updates regarding minor planning applications despite previous reassurances from NIEA.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to discuss the matter further once it had considered a connected matter in the next item in Matters Arising.

The Chair referred to correspondence from the Department, dated 9 February, regarding a customer service update on NIEA Planning Consultations in response to concerns regarding the lack of response to queries.

The Committee noted the Planning Response Team is the single point of contact for all queries related to planning and provides a coordinated and integrated response across DAERA's areas of responsibility.

The Committee noted the NIEA will provide an update by 1 March on all planning consultations awaiting a response through the NI Consultee Hub, including an indicative timeframe for a response. Indicative response times for each development type will also be published on the DAERA website.

Members concerns raised at the continuing delays included the detrimental impact on tourism and rural areas arising from delays in hospitality sector applications; and the negative effect of staffing vacancies on existing NIEA staff.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Minister to request a further update regarding efforts to address the ongoing issues of staff vacancies within the Department.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the NIEA requesting a breakdown of staff vacancies at both administrative and specialist grades.

The Committee considered a response from the Chair of the Committee on Procedures, dated 12 February, in reply to its letter outlining difficulties in the Legislative Consent Memorandums (LCM) process.

The Committee noted that it first wrote to the Committee on Procedures on 11 September raising issues in the LCM process for the Pet Abduction Private Member's Bill and the Animal Welfare (Import of Dogs, Cats and Ferrets) Bill.

The Committee noted that the matter of LCM process is on the Committee for Procedures list of priority areas and work commenced on the matter on 11 February.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Foyle Association of Salmon and Trout Anglers (FASTA) representatives joined the meeting at 10:31am

6. Oral Evidence Session - Foyle Association of Salmon and Trout Anglers (FASTA) - Pollution threats in the Lough

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr David Nelson – Secretary of FASTA;
- Mr Colin Duncan;
- Mr John Irvine;
- Mr Gary Irvine; and
- Mr Brendan Winters – all Members of FASTA.

The Committee heard details of the challenges of protecting the Lough which is an important spawning ground under threat from pollution resulting in the downward trend in salmon stocks and the loss of species such as roach and perch.

The Committee also heard issues included gaps in planning office risk management; a lack of inspections due to NIEA resource issues; outdated regulations and fines too low to function as a deterrent to polluters.

There then followed a question and answer session.

Areas of discussion included:

- Concerns at the lack of oversight and regulations for proposals for large scale anaerobic digesters,
- A lack of tourism initiatives to promote angling in the Lough area; and
- A call for government funded telemetry to assess water quality.

The Chair advised that the Committee has agreed to undertake further scrutiny of Anaerobic Digesters and will seek FASTA's views on the matter in due course.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The FASTA representatives left the meeting at 11:36am

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11:37am

7. SI 2026/xxx The Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) (Extension to Maritime Activities) Order 2026

This item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted The UK Emissions Trading Scheme Authority has laid the SI under the draft affirmative resolution procedure, to expand the scope of the scheme to include the domestic maritime sector and it is anticipated that that it will come into operation in July 2026, subject to affirmation by all legislatures.

The Committee also noted correspondence from Stena Line and UK Chamber of Shipping outlining its concerns on the effect that this proposed UK ETS will have on Northern Ireland.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Richard Coey, Deputy Director Emissions Trading Scheme, Carbon Pricing & Windsor Framework; and
- Joseph Kelly, Deputy Principal, Emissions Trading Scheme Branch

The Officials advised the Committee that the minor errors in drafting previously highlighted to the Committee have been deemed inconsequential and no redrafting was required.

The Committee heard that including domestic maritime within the UK ETS may remove a key barrier to decarbonising the sector as the current price of maritime fuels do not reflect their environmental costs and it provides the incentive to adopt low-carbon fuels, fuel-efficient technologies, and operating practices.

The Committee also heard details of the changes to the ETS that the SI will introduce and a 50% surrender reduction on emissions from NI-GB routes should help mitigate the impacts on consumers and businesses in Northern Ireland (NI).

A questions and answer session followed.

Members highlighted concerns including:

- lack of local shore side electricity infrastructure - Officials stated there is a plan for development but this may not be operational until 2035;
- NI business is at a competitive disadvantage due to reliance on sea routes and that costs would be passed on to the consumer;
- ongoing business uncertainty due to the current EU's emissions-scheme review and negotiations with the UK on a potential linkage of schemes; and
- the scheme may function as a tax on activity and not a driver for emissions reduction.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to undertake further scrutiny and to invite Stena Line and the UK Chamber of Shipping to brief the Committee on their concerns.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 12:11pm

The meeting was suspended at 12:11pm

The meeting resumed at 12:22pm

The Committee agreed to move to Agenda Item 16, as it was added to the Agenda after the main Pack was issued.

16 - SL1 - Mandatory Use of Closed-Circuit Television in slaughterhouses Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee noted that the Department intends to make this SR under the draft affirmative procedure to make it compulsory for all licenced slaughterhouses in Northern Ireland to have CCTV installed where live animals are present, keep recordings for 90 days and to allow access to the footage for authorised persons to view, copy or seize.

The Committee noted that Officials are scheduled to brief the Committee on the SR on 19 March and noted that it has now received the SL1 and that the minimum 4-week process has commenced before it agrees, or otherwise, the SL1.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note receipt of the SL1 and proposed SR and that these will be published as part of the Committee's Call for Views on the proposal.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the policy detail of the SL1 at the meeting on 19 March, when it will be briefed by Officials after the Committee has conducted and analysed responses to the Citizen Space survey.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a briefing from officials is not necessary at this stage.

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 12:24pm

8. Dilapidation Bill - Committee Deliberations

This item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee continued its Deliberations on the Dilapidation Bill.

The Committee considered the response from NILGA in relation to their suggested amendment at clause 6.

The following Departmental Officials joined the Committee meeting:

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

The Officials advised that they will be a meeting with NILGA to discuss the Bill on 24 February.

The Committee agreed to start the deliberations at Clause 10.

The Officials gave the Committee a brief overview of Clauses 10: Emergency Action.

The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence on Clause 10.

The Chair highlighted the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) A1P1 that are engaged in the Bill.

There then followed a question and answer session in which the Officials responded to Committee queries on the issues that has been raised in the evidence to date.

In response to a query regarding if 14 days was considered too short for an appeal Officials advised that it was deemed to be a sufficient period.

The Chair brought deliberation of Clause 10 to a conclusion and advised that the Committee could return to it at the next meeting if Members required further clarification.

The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence on Clause 11 – Defective Premises Notice

The Chair highlighted the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) A1P1 that are engaged in the Bill.

Officials advised clause 11 and the powers replicated in it that are currently available to councils, would be under discussion at the meeting with NILGA on 24 February.

There then followed a question and answer session in which the Officials responded to Committee queries on the issues that has been raised in the evidence to date.

In response to queries about how the powers in Clause 11 may conflict with existing powers, Officials responded that Committee would shortly be issued with a table comparing existing powers available with those detailed in the Bill to assist with scrutiny.

Other areas of discussion included the potential for council liability for failure to act due to the discretionary element contained in the Bill.

The Chair brought deliberation of Clause 11 to a conclusion and advised that the Committee could return to it at the next meeting if Members required further clarification.

The Officials gave the Committee a brief overview of Clauses 12-15: Costs for District council, Charge on Land, Costs of Interested Persons, Obstruction by Occupier

The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence on Clause 12

The Chair highlighted the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) A1P1 that are engaged in the Bill.

There then followed a question and answer session in which the Officials responded to Committee queries on the issues that has been raised in the evidence to date.

Areas of discussions included concerns that a lack of robust costs recovery will weaken the effectiveness of the Bill.

The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence on Clause 13: Charge on Land and Clause 14: Costs of Interested Persons.

The Chair highlighted the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) A1P1 that are engaged in the Bill

There then followed a question and answer session in which the Officials responded to Committee queries on the issues that has been raised in the evidence to date.

In response to a Member's query regarding a proposal for a central funding that councils could access until cost recovery is achieved, Officials stated there was no discrete funding support in the Bill but councils currently have access to other financial support from the Department.

The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence on Clause 15 - Obstruction by occupier

There then followed a question and answer session in which the Officials responded to Committee queries on the issues that has been raised in the evidence to date.

In response to a request for councils to be given powers to vest land, Officials responded that councils already have that power through other legislation and so there is no requirement to add an amendment to include it in the Bill.

The Chair brought deliberation of Clauses 12-15 to a conclusion and advised that the Committee could return to them at the next meeting if Members required further clarification.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance and confirmed that deliberations would continue at the next Committee meeting.

The Officials left the meeting at 1:01pm

9. **Departmental Written Briefing – Update on the Fruit & Vegetable Aid Scheme (FVAS) in Northern Ireland**

The Committee noted the Clerk's Memo summarising the written briefing, which contained commercially sensitive information and provides an update on developments in relation to DAERA funding support under the FVAS since the passage of the Agriculture Northern Ireland Act (2025). The Committee noted that the responsibility for administration of the FVAS transferred to DAERA on 31 December and the Minister previously confirmed that support under FVAS would continue until a suitable replacement is in place.

The Committee noted that during 2025, local growers formed two prospective Producer Organisations (PO) and, subject to outcome of a compliance inspection, formal recognition from the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) is expected in spring 2026.

The Committee was pleased to note that one PO has wider representation from other types of horticulture growers other than just mushroom growers, as it was concerned at the lack of representation of other types of growers during its consideration of the Bill.

The Committee noted the Department's focus since enactment of the Agriculture Act (Northern Ireland) 2025 has been on preparations for the 2026-28 FVAS programme period with work on a successor scheme planned to start later in 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department and request further detail on the new replacement scheme and a briefing in advance of its publication.

10. Departmental Written Briefing - Synopsis of Responses to Recent Consultation on the Fourth Cycle River Basin Management Plan (RBMP) for 2028-2033.

The Committee noted the Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017, obligates the Department to review and update River Basin Management Plans (RBMP) every six years setting out how each water body will achieve good ecological status and good surface water chemical status by 2027 with an option to extend the deadline for specified chemicals to 2033 and 2039.

The Committee also noted the 2024 water quality classification update, published last year indicates an overall deterioration in surface water body status since 2021 and highlights the need for urgent action.

The Committee noted that the six month consultation which closed on 3 January sought views on the proposed three-year roadmap on the effectiveness of the third cycle plan and to guide the final Fourth Cycle plan received four responses.

The Committee noted that it identified recurring themes and priorities: Demand for Localised Site-Specific Action; Accessibility and Transparency; Enhanced Stakeholder Engagement; and Catchment Based Management.

The Committee noted the draft fourth cycle RBMP will go out for a 6 month consultation this year and in the meantime, work will commence on developing a Programme of Measures for the Fourth Cycle RBMP based on Education; Incentivisation and Innovation; Regulation, and Enforcement.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

11. Departmental Written Briefing – Fisheries and Water Environment Bill – Consultation Summary and Analysis.

The Committee noted the proposed Fisheries and Water Environment Bill contains two policy elements - Fisheries and Aquaculture; and Water Quality and aims to modernise policies to support the delivery of key initiatives such as the Lough Neagh Action Plan, the Environmental Improvement Plan, and the Programme for Government.

The Committee also noted the consultations revealed overall broad support for modernising fisheries and water environment legislation and respondents gave support to areas such as:

- Urgent, well-funded action to improve water quality and restore public trust;
- Robust standardised enforcement powers, introducing administrative penalties and fixed penalty notices with an increase of current fines and tiered sanctions based on severity and intent; and
- Powers to manage and regulate fishing rights and the introduction of permits with an emphasis on ecosystem protection.

The Committee noted it will receive further updates as work progresses and it is anticipated that subject to Executive agreement, the Bill will be introduced in May 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

12. Correspondence

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the following items of correspondence.

- A Clerk's Memo, dated 12 February, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding the Review of Arm's-Length Bodies (ALBs);
- A copy of the Update to Committees Privacy Notice and Guidance which has been amended to reflect feedback received;

- Correspondence that the Committee has been copied into between Defra to the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee providing a further update in the following matters: the Defence Industry; Obligations of Operators and Traders; and EU School Scheme (regarding School Fruit, Vegetables and Milk Scheme);
- An invitation from Queen's University to visit its exhibition at the Balmoral Show.

15. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

16. Any Other Business

A member requested an update from the Department regarding the progress of the Sustainable Farming Investment Scheme noting that the Committee were briefed by Officials on the proposed regulations at its meeting on 11 December.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department requesting an update on the progress of the regulations.

17. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 26 February at Room 21, Parliament Buildings at 10:00am.

The meeting was adjourned at 1:07pm

Signature: ……..

Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson

Dated …….