



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

**Minutes of Proceedings**

**5 February 2026**

**Meeting location: Room 21, Parliament Buildings, Belfast**

**Present:** Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)  
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
John Blair MLA  
Aoife Finnegan MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Gareth Wilson MLA

**Via Zoom:** Áine Murphy MLA  
Daniel McCrossan 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 10:17am***

**1. Apologies**

Tom Buchanan MLA

**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 that he is an executor and owner of a small farm in Co Tyrone.

**3. Chairperson's Business**

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Minister, dated 2 February, providing an update on the Climate Change (Just Transition Commission) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

The Committee noted that the next stage is to provide the statutory basis to establish a Climate Change Just Transition Commission for Northern Ireland.

The Committee also noted that Officials are in the process of preparing an SL1 for the Just Transition Commission Regulations and will provide the Committee with an oral briefing on 12 March. The Minister is due to attend Committee on 5 March to provide an update on the Department's legislative programme.

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

The Chairperson referred to the NIEA written briefing providing an update on the implementation of the Habitats Regulations in Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted the Report gives details on 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.

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

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from an individual to the Minister, dated 28 January, copied to the Committee, asking for the Minister's intervention regarding the 2026 Farm Sustainability Payment (FSP) Entitlement.

The Committee noted the correspondence outlined the individual's concerns on the impact on his farm business following notification that although he had not met the historic years requirement for only one year, he is now required to transfer entitlements by sale or gift by 26 May 2026 or else they will expire, leaving him with none from 2027.

The Chair reminded Members that Committee does not generally deal with individual's issues, in this case the matters raised relate to the Committee's wider scrutiny of the FSP.

Members raised a number of concerns:

- the impact of unintended consequences of the FSP historic years exercise; and
- wider concerns regarding the issue of entitlements, including the effect of the closure of the Regional Reserve and the Young Farmers Fund and the barriers this has created for new entrants to farming.

A Member proposed it would be beneficial to meet with UFU and Young Farmers to discuss the issue and wider issues of rural support.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister to raise its concerns regarding the issue of the unintended consequences of the FSP historic years exercise.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to add a proposed meeting to its Forward Work Programme work with the UFU and Young Farmers, to discuss the issues.

The Chair referred to correspondence from the Minister regarding a Notification of his intention to revoke S.R. 2026/1 The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026).

The Committee noted the Minister intends to submit a new SL1 proposing to introduce an annual closed period from January to April to commence from 1

January 2027, within the confines of the Strangford Lough Special Area of Conservation, rather than the full intertidal area.

The Committee also noted the Minister's request for the Committee to withdraw its Prayer of Annulment motion that it had agreed at its meeting of 2 February, currently listed on the Order Paper for 9 February.

The Committee noted that the 55<sup>th</sup> ESR Report brought the SR to the special attention of the Assembly.

**The Committee agreed to go into closed session for a briefing from Angela Kelly, the Examiner of Statutory Rules to take oral legal advice regarding the findings in the ESR Report.**

***The meeting went into closed session at 10:26am***

***The Meeting resumed in open session at 10:50am***

The Chair referred to the Minister's intention to revoke the SR 2026/1 and if it were laid would the Committee be content to not move its Prayer of Annulment motion listed on the Order Paper for Monday, 9 February.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that if the Minister lays the SR to revoke SR 2026/1, before 5pm on Friday 6 February, the Chair would write to the Speaker to advise that it is his intention to not move the Motion: Prayer of Annulment – The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.

#### **4. Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 29 January 2026.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the extra meeting held on 2 February 2026.

## 5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 29 January, regarding the Closure of ABP Food Group retail packing plant at Granville in Dungannon.

The Committee noted that the Department understands ABP have committed to minimise the impact of this closure on the staff involved where possible and it remains committed to the Northern Ireland agri-food sector.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister for the Economy requesting details of support being offered from Invest NI.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 29 January, regarding Bluetongue Virus Restrictions and Possible Effect on Hill Farmers.

The Committee noted that the Department states that measures are in place to facilitate movements to NI abattoirs, including moves under licence from the Temporary Control Zone (TCZ).

The Committee also noted it provides details in relation to movements to Great Britain and to the Republic of Ireland.

A Member expressed concern at the impact on farmers and queried what is being done to secure a derogation for farmers wishing to transport animals across the border and queried the timeline and requirements for lifting the TCZ.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask for clarification on what is required to lift the TCZ, when it will be lifted, and if any derogations are being considered.

The Committee considered a response from the North of Ireland Veterinary Association (NIVA) and the British Veterinary Association (BVA), dated 28 January, outlining their current position regarding veterinary medicines supply in Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted NIVA and the BVA state it is too soon to conclude that there are no emerging supply risks, due to the stockpiling of medicines ahead of the grace period ending, and that supply pressures may become clear once existing stocks diminish. In addition, despite no reports of price increases to date, pricing pressures are being closely monitored by all stakeholders and continued vigilance will be essential in the months ahead.

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

***The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:57am***

***The Chair left the meeting at 11:38am and the Deputy Chair chaired the meeting in his absence.***

***The Chair rejoined the meeting at 11:45am***

## **5. Departmental Oral Evidence Session - Progress of Lough Neagh Action Plan**

The following DAERA Officials briefed the Committee:

- Mr Craig Hartin – Lough Neagh Delivery and Governance Branch;
- Dr Gareth Greer, Head of Branch, River Basin Districts – Priority Catchments Branch; and
- Mr Patrick Murphy – Head of Branch, Lough Neagh Science Advice Branch.

The Committee was briefed on the progress and status of the actions in Lough Neagh Action Plan, which includes 37 actions. To date 15 actions have been delivered, and the remaining 22 are progressing including:

- the implementation of a suite of water quality-based initiatives;
- progression of Sustainable Utilisation of Livestock Slurry (SULS) projects;
- progression of other SBRI projects such as Remote Sensing of blue green algae blooms; and Sustainable Use of Layer Manure (SULM) project.

The Committee also heard the delivery of the remaining actions have been allocated £6.3 million Resource DEL and £9.2 million Capital DEL from the Final Budget 2025-26 and the draft budget for 2026-29/30 proposes an annual budget allocation of £5m Resource over the next three years.

There then followed a question and answer session.

In response to a Member's concerns regarding the timescales for completion of phases for In-Lough Mitigation, Officials responded that they are keen to see the projects deployed as soon as possible, but time is needed to ensure that they achieve the best outcomes.

A Member queried the role of NI Water regarding Lough Neagh wastewater schemes and requested more specifics on its role in the Plan going forward. Other areas of discussion included the possibility of public and community ownership and interdepartmental co-operation.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the Clerk would consult with the Clerk to the Committee for Infrastructure regarding a joint Committee meeting to discuss the role of NI Water in the Action Plan.

***The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11:48am***

***The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11:49am***

## **6. Departmental Oral Evidence Session - Statutory Instrument: Sea Fisheries (Amendment) Regulations 2026**

The following DAERA Officials briefed the Committee:

- Ms Fiona Taylor, Head of Sea Fisheries Policy and Grants Branch; and
- Mr Roy Griffin, Inland Fisheries Policy, and Legislation.

The Committee heard that under the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, the UK is required to hold annual consultations with the EU to set total allowable catches for jointly managed fish stocks and that the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is bringing forward this UK-wide Statutory Instrument (SI), due to come into force on 27 February, to implement management measures agreed for two jointly managed stocks, picked dogfish (commonly referred to as spurdog) and European seabass.

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard that the removal of the maximum retention size for spurdog on commercial fishing vessels is welcomed by commercial fisherman, as they will be able to retain a larger part of their catch.

The Committee also heard that the daily catch limit for European seabass will increase from 2 to 3 fish a day for recreational fishermen.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

***The Officials left the meeting at 11:57am***

***The meeting was suspended at 11:58am***

***The Meeting resumed at 12:08pm***

***The Officials joined the meeting at 12:08pm***

## **7. Dilapidation Bill - Committee Deliberations**

***This item was recorded by Hansard***

The Committee commenced its Deliberations on the Dilapidation Bill and noted that it is not the formal clause by clause stage but the opportunity to go through the Clauses one at a time and comprehensively review with the Department any issues raised in evidence by stakeholders or by Committee Members.

The following Departmental Officials joined the Committee meeting:

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

**The Officials gave the Committee a brief overview of Clauses 1 to Clause 3 covering Detriment to local amenity in relation to Maintenance Notices; Appeals; and Breaches.**

**The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised by the respondents to the Call for Views on Clause 1- Maintenance Notice.**

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.

Members raised concerns regarding the definition of 'detriment' and 'serious detriment' and the need for clarification for councils to achieve a consistent

approach. Officials responded that the concept has been left at the individual council's discretion to allow for some flexibility in approach.

The Officials also advised that a round table discussion is planned with NILGA to discuss outstanding issues.

**The Chair outlined an overview of main comments and issues raised by the respondents to the Call for Views on Clause 2 - Appeal against Maintenance Notice.**

The Committee had no questions or comments regarding Clause 2.

**The Chair outlined an overview of main comments and issues raised by the respondents to the Call for Views on Clause 3 - Breach of Maintenance Notice.**

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

Members heard the compliance rates for maintenance notices in England is high and in the Belfast City Council area using legislation currently in place in Northern Ireland.

The Chair brought deliberation of Clauses 1 to 3 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.

***The Officials left the meeting at 12:39pm***

***The RalSe officials joined the meeting at 12:39pm***

**8. RalSe Oral Briefing - Environmental Principles within Policy Making - Origins and Application in Great Britain and Ireland**

The Committee noted that it had commissioned the RalSe paper to support its scrutiny of DAERA's draft Environmental Principles Policy Statement (EPPS) placing a statutory duty on all departments and on UK Government Ministers, when making policy for Northern Ireland, to have due regard to the EPPS.

The Committee noted it was briefed by Officials on the EPPS on 4 December and agreed to return to the matter in the new Year and to seek a briefing from Assembly research on the design and implementation of principles in other UK jurisdictions and the Republic of Ireland.

The following RaISe officials briefed the Committee:

- Suzie Cave - Research Officer; and
- Mark Allen – Research Officer

There then followed a question and answer session.

The Committee heard that the concept of environmental principles is not new and has been in place in some form since the 1970's. The Committee heard that the Republic of Ireland has not written the EU Principles into legislation, so it is difficult to track how it operates in practice there.

In response to a Member's query why Northern Ireland, unlike Scotland and Wales, has not created its own legislation given its unique circumstances, Officials advised it was in part due to the period of time the Assembly was not in operation and so provisions within the Environmental Act 2021 require Northern Ireland to follow the approach taken in England.

The Chair thanked the Officials for the briefing.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to advise it is content to support the Environmental Principles Policy Statement and to query a number of issues that RaISe highlighted from the original LCM.

## 9. Correspondence

**Agreed:** The Chair drew attention to a number of items of correspondence and the Committee agreed to note.

- Correspondence dated 23 January, from the Department giving notice of minor typographical errors contained in two SIs that had previously been laid: The Greenhouse Gas Emission Trading Scheme (Amendment) Order 2026; and the Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) (Extension to Maritime Activities) Order 2026.

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

- A Clerk's Memo dated 29 January, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn – November (R8) and December (R9) Positions.

**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 regarding the Supply of Veterinary Medicines

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

- A copy of the New Pivotal tracker report titled Two years of the restored Northern Ireland Executive.

**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**

A Member raised the issue of slow responses from NIEA and SES to planning consultations and suggested inviting the Planning Consultee Forum to brief the Committee on the matter.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that the Clerk would investigate this matter further with the Clerk to the Infrastructure Committee.

## **12. Date and Time of Next Meeting**

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 12 February at Room 21, Parliament Buildings at 10:00am.

***The meeting was adjourned at 1:02pm***

**Signature: .....**

**Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson**

**Dated .....**