



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

**Minutes of Proceedings**

**12 February 2026**

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

**Present:**

Robbie Butler MLA (Chairperson)  
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
John Blair MLA  
Daniel McCrossan MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Áine Murphy MLA  
Gareth Wilson MLA

**Via Zoom:**

Tom Buchanan MLA  
Aoife Finnegan 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 10:07am***

**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.

Daniel McCrossan MLA declared an interest as the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee.

**3. Chairperson's Business**

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from Julie Hill, the new Interim Chair of the OEP, notifying the Committee of her appointment whilst Defra and DAERA conclude a permanent appointment. The Committee noted the interim Chair thanks the Committee for its continuing engagement and support.

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

The Chairperson referred to correspondence, dated 9 February, to the Department and the Minister, which the Committee has been copied into, from Save the Moat – Save the Sperrins, regarding a formal complaint due to a personal data breach in DAERA.

The Committee noted it alleges that an email titled “DAERA Update and Next steps on establishment of the Just Transition Commission,” sent on 9 February, exposed the personal email addresses of dozens of recipients.

The Chair also referred to correspondence, dated 11 February, from the Minister in relation to the data protection breach.

The Committee noted the Minister stated the investigation is ongoing, but initial findings show that a staff member inadvertently failed to use bcc when issuing the

email. The information disclosed was limited to email addresses, and the risk is considered low and has been referred to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).

Members expressed concern about the general handling of data and the potential cost in terms of resources and to the public purse and sought clarification on the number of those affected by the breach.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking more clarity on the cause of the breach; the number of individuals impacted, and details of the associated costs incurred.

The Chairperson referred to the SL1 - The Sheep Carcase Classification and Price Reporting to introduce mandatory sheep carcase classification and price reporting in Northern Ireland.

The Committee noted no responses were received to the Committee's Call for Views survey, which closed on 6 February and that Officials will provide a briefing on the SL1 on 26 February.

The Committee noted the Clerk had been contacted by the NI Meat Exporters who had been unaware of the SR being with the Committee and will now provide written views based on the Citizen Space questions.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the NI Sheep Taskforce to seek its views on the SR in a written response in advance of the briefing from officials on 26 February.

The Chair referred to a request from the Irish News to release all correspondence and briefing papers the Committee has received relating to the Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) Regulations 2026.

The Committee noted that under the new process for dealing with delegated legislation all papers in relation to SRs are now published on the Committee's webpages. However, as this SR was under the previous process there was no assumption that papers would be automatically published.

Members discussed the importance of raising awareness amongst the public of forthcoming legislation to ensure sufficient engagement in the process.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to publish the papers on the Committee webpage.

The Chair advised the Committee that 23 February is the provisional date for the debates on the Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Spring Supplementary Estimates (SSE) 2025-2026 and the Supply Resolution for the Northern Ireland Vote on Account 2026- 2027.

The Chair briefly recapped the range of oral and written briefings from DAERA's finance Officials throughout 2025 and 2026 to date.

The Chair reminded the Committee that he will speak on its behalf at the SSE debate and that the Committee had agreed to respond to the Finance Committee with any issues in relation to DAERA's 2025-26 Budget position by the end of February.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that a further briefing was not required as it was content that it had received sufficient information from Officials for the 25/26 budget and for a response to the Finance Committee.

***John Blair MLA joined the meeting at 10:16am***

#### **4. Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 5 February 2026.

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

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 3 February regarding the NIEA's Review of Odour Management.

The Committee noted the response states that, following review of the updated UK Environment Agency H4 guidance, NIEA has decided it is not suitable for its use due to changes made to assessing odour impacts.

The Committee noted that NIEA will continue to use the previous version of the H4 odour management guidance until it completes a review of other guidance available.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to NIEA to seek further information on the rationale for its decision not to follow the updated UK Environment Agency H4 guidance.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 5 February, regarding Reciprocal Tariffs by the United States of America in response to the Committee request for the Department's understanding of the potential impact on the local economy.

The Committee noted the Department understands that an overall fall in NI exports to the US is likely a result of an increase of tariffs, from an average low of 2% to 10%, and the policy uncertainty that exporters faced.

The Committee noted the Department will continue to monitor the impact of US tariffs on Northern Ireland and the agri-food trade, and the Minister will make representations to DfE and Defra, as necessary.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department seeking further detail regarding the percentage of Agri products impacted by tariffs and to clarify what role the NI Bureau has in promoting Northern Ireland products in the USA.

The Chair advised the Committee he would move to Matters Arising item 4 as it is also in connection with US Tariffs.

The Chair referred to the response from the Department of Economy (DfE), dated 11 February, regarding recent changes to US trade tariff policy and the potential implications for business in Northern Ireland (NI).

The Committee noted the response provided information and analysis, highlighting that in the year ending Q3 2025 compared to the previous 12 months total NI exports of goods fell by 1.0% to £10.9 billion and NI exports to the US decreased 27% to £1.4 billion.

The Committee noted that the DfE stated that US trade policy during 2025 is likely to have contributed to uncertainty affecting investment decisions, contract negotiations, and export behaviour.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the DfE seeking clarity regarding the 27% fall in exports and details of the sectors impacted, in particular the agri-food sector.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 9 February, in reply to Committee queries raised on the Dilapidation Bill following its meeting on 22 January.

The Committee noted it provided details regarding a proposed round-table discussion with DAERA, Northern Ireland Local Government Association (NILGA) and Building Control Northern Ireland (BCNI); proposed Ministerial amendments to Clause 11; and the Rural Needs Impact Assessment.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to return to the matter at the Dilapidation Bill deliberations at Agenda item 10.

***The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:27am***

***Áine Murphy MLA joined the meeting at 10:50am***

## **6. Departmental Oral Evidence Session - Rethinking Our Resources: The NI Resources and Waste Management Strategy**

The following DAERA Officials briefed the Committee:

- Shane Doris, Director of Environment Resources Policy;
- Carmel McDowell, Head of Resources & Waste Strategy Policy Branch; and

- Alan Collins, Policy Advisor, Resources and Waste Strategy Policy Branch

The Committee heard that the draft strategy builds on previous waste management plans and aims to transition Northern Ireland from a linear “take, make, dispose” model to a circular economy focused on reducing, reusing, repairing, and recycling, contributing to Net Zero by 2050.

The Committee also heard the strategy is split into four parts; vision and need for change, enabling action, implementation, and monitoring via 10 targets and 63 supporting actions covering household, commercial, industrial waste, and animal by-products.

There then followed a question and answer session.

In response to Members’ queries regarding councils funding and resources, Officials stated that councils are currently availing of funding support and there would also be opportunities for them to make cost savings.

Officials recognised that insufficient local waste management infrastructure results in the export of waste, leading to missed opportunities to recycle locally to support the development of a circular economy.

Other areas of discussion included:

- Concerns regarding unintended consequences such as an increase in fly tipping and littering;
- Plans for engagement with the public and schools to improve messaging; and
- Opportunities for small business to work collaboratively for cost efficiencies;

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

***The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11:02am***

## **7. SL1 - The Climate Change (Just Transition Commission) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Committee noted that the Department intends to make the SR under the draft affirmative procedure to establish an advisory Non-Departmental Public Body to be

known as the “Just Transition Commission” and to deliver on the requirements of section 37 of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

The Committee noted that Officials are scheduled to brief the Committee on the SR on 12 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 statutory rule 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 12 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.

## **8. SR 2026/14 The Bovine Genetics Genotyping Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Committee noted on 4 December it agreed that the Department proceed to make the SR under the negative resolution procedure, to provide it with the legal powers to implement the Bovine Genetics Genotyping Scheme.

The Committee also noted that it was broadly supportive of the scheme, but some Members had concerns regarding communication of the scheme and the connections to conditionality and that if it became compulsory at any time in the future it may impact on farm payments.

The Committee noted the Department has advised there have been no changes to policy content since the SL1 was submitted.

**Agreed:** The Committee considered SR 2026/14 The Bovine Genetics Genotyping Scheme Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and had no objection to the Rule, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

**9. SR 2026/15 The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) (Revocation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026**

The Committee noted that in response to its Prayer of Annulment motion, this SR, under the negative resolution procedure, revokes SR 2026/1 The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) Regulations.

The Committee also noted that ESR Report has not brought the SR to the attention of the Assembly.

**Agreed:** The Committee considered SR 2026/15 The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) (Revocation) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and had no objection to the Rule, subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

***The meeting was suspended at 11:06am***

***The meeting resumed at 11:15am***

***The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11:15am***

***Michelle McIlveen MLA joined the meeting at 11:50am***

**10. Dilapidation Bill - Committee Deliberations**

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

The Committee continued its Deliberations on the Dilapidation Bill.

The Chair highlighted the new The Convention Rights Memo (CRM) that is now being prepared for every Bill by Assembly Legal Services and address issues arising under the European Convention on Human Rights and Article 2(1) of the Windsor Framework in relation to the Bill. The memorandum does not constitute legal advice but sets out whether the Bill engages Convention rights, and where there is potential interference with a Convention right, those clauses which may merit further scrutiny by the Committee.

The following Departmental Officials joined the Committee meeting:

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

The Officials advised that they were confident that the proposed roundtable meeting with DAERA officials, NILGA and BCNI would take place week commencing 23 February.

The Chair got Committee agreement to start the deliberations at Clause 4.

**The Officials gave the Committee a brief overview of Clauses 4 to Clause 6 covering Serious Detriment to local amenity - Dilapidation Notices, Appeals and Breaches.**

**The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence on Clause 4 – Dilapidation Notices.**

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 Members' concerns regarding the consistency of how 'serious detriment' is defined across councils, Officials advised that there are no plans to prescribe a definition in legislation, and that councils will retain a degree of self-regulation.

The Chair referred to an amendment proposed by the Historic Environment Division (HED) in relation to heritage buildings. Officials advised that they would consider the matter further and report back to the Committee in due course.

A Member highlighted concerns that varying levels of deprivation exist across different areas, noting that rural communities are often disproportionately affected.

**The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence on Clause 5 – Appeals against dilapidation 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.

In response to Members' concerns about the financial and resource impacts on councils involved in the appeals process; Officials responded that some costs can be recovered through fees and fines.

Members heard that Councils would have some discretion and a common sense approach, where delays in repair work are due to circumstances beyond the owner's control.

Other areas of discussion included:

- The length of appeals notices; and
- Issues for inherited property owners on low income without the means to carry out repair work.

### **The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence on Clause 6 – Breach of Dilapidation Notice**

The Chair highlighted the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) 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.

Members heard Officials will discuss any issues raised during its roundtable meeting with BCNI and NILGA. Areas of discussions included:

- If the proposed penalties provided a sufficient deterrent and Officials highlighted the uplift to a £5000 fine; the availability on indictment of an unlimited fine and up to two years' imprisonment, and no option to discharge liability by fixed penalty notice;
- Whether repossession would be a more appropriate option than imprisonment? Officials advised that the councils' option of power of sale is intended primarily as cost-recovery rather than a sanction.

The Chair brought deliberation of Clauses 4 to 6 to a conclusion and advised that the Committee could return to them at the next meeting if Members required further clarification.

**The Officials gave the Committee a brief overview of Clauses 7 to Clause 9 covering Serious Detriment to local amenity covering Dangerous Structures Notices, Appeals and Breaches.**

**The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence on Clause 7 - Dangerous Structures Notices.**

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 repeal of existing powers councils currently use with Officials responding that some of these powers are included in the legislation and will highlight this to councils.

Members also raised concerns that demolition could encouraged or even incentivised by the Bill.

**The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence on Clause 8 – Appeals against Structures Notices.**

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.

The Committee heard that the length of appeal period has been consulted on and the Department considers it provides an adequate amount of time.

**The Chair outlined an overview of the main comments and issues raised in evidence on Clause 9 - Breach of Dangerous Structures Notices.**

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

The Committee had no questions or comments regarding Clause 9.

The Chair brought deliberation of Clauses 7 to 9 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 12:34pm***

## **11. Departmental Written Briefing - Fourth Carbon Budget Consultation**

### **Summary of Responses**

The Committee noted that the briefing detailed the responses to the Consultation that sought views on the UK Climate Change Committee (CCC) advice to Northern Ireland, will be used to inform the draft Regulations that set the Fourth Carbon Budget covering the period 2038-2042.

The Committee noted that 66% of all respondents 'Strongly Agreed' or 'Agreed' to the proposal to align to the CCC advice and 80% of responses from organisations indicated that they 'Agreed' or 'Strongly Agreed' with setting the carbon budget in line with the CCC advice.

The Committee also noted that following analysis of the responses the Department will provide further detail on the proposed policy content of the draft Regulations which will be laid under the draft affirmative procedure.

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

## **12. Departmental Written Briefing - Update on the Outcome of the Consultation on New Rules for Selling and Supplying Puppies and Kittens in Northern Ireland, and the Proposed Way Forward.**

The Committee noted that the Department proposes new rules to introduce a registration scheme, which will require all persons who sell, give away, or otherwise transfer ownership of puppies and kittens to:

- apply to their local council to be registered;
- comply with conditions of registration;
- pay the appropriate registration fee, and
- have their details recorded in a council register.

The Committee noted that respondents welcomed stronger welfare protections for puppies and kittens but emphasised the need for adequate resources and enhanced enforcement powers for councils, alongside better public awareness about responsibly purchasing a pet.

The Committee noted Councils expressed concerns about capacity, resources, and funding and that any shortfall in full-cost recovery must be met by DAERA.

The Committee noted the Department intends to publish the responses and draft Regulations under the Welfare of Animals Act (Northern Ireland) 2011 by draft affirmative resolution.

A Member queried in response to councils concerns regarding resources had the Department considered a centralised IT System approach.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Department to get a timeline for the introduction of the legislation and if the Department has considered a centralised IT System.

### **13. Departmental Written Briefing - Proposed UK Statutory Instrument (SI) – The Employment Rights Act 2025 (Enforcement) (Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2026**

The Committee noted that two SRs - the Gangmasters (Appeals) Regulations (NI) 2006 and the Gangmasters Licensing (Exclusions) Regulations (NI) 2014, now require technical amendments to ensure they remain fully operable.

The Committee also noted the Department of Business and Trade plans to lay the proposed SI at Westminster in late February, to come into operation in April, and that Minister Muir is content that the necessary amendments to the devolved legislation are made via a SI to allow the legislation to proceed on time.

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

### **14. Correspondence**

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 3 February, regarding the Assembly Debate of the Draft Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) Order 2026 on 16 February.

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

The Committee considered a Clerk's Memo, dated 9 February from the Clerk to the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) regarding its primacy over NIAO reports published.

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

The Committee considered a copy of the Office for Environmental Protection (OEP) Annual Report and Accounts 2024/25.

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

The Committee considered a copy of the Youth Assembly January Update.

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

The Committee considered a copy of the 56<sup>th</sup> ESR Report which refers to S.R. 2026/15: The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) (Revocation) Regulations

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

## **15. Forward Work Programme**

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

The Committee noted it has received an offer from the Lough Neagh Fishermens' Co-operative to host its meeting and brief the Committee on 26 March at the Visitor Centre at Lough Neagh Eel Fisheries in Toomebridge.

The Committee also noted it had previously agreed to visit the Enva Fridge Recycling facility at Toomebridge.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to hold its meeting on 26 March at The Visitor Centre at Lough Neagh Eel Fisheries followed by a visit to Enva.

The Committee noted it has received an offer to host its meeting on 30 April at the Exploris Aquarium in Portaferry and to see the DAERA funded work undertaken at its Seal Sanctuary.

The Chair proposed that after that the Committee would then visit Portavogie Harbour, to meet local fishermen and representatives from Northern Ireland Fish Producers Organisation (NIFPO) and Anglo Northern Irish Fish Producers Organisation (ANIFPO).

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to hold its meeting at Exploris Aquarium in Portaferry on 30 April followed by a visit to Portavogie Harbour.

The Chair sought agreement from the Committee to commission a paper from RalSe in relation to Anaerobic Digesters (AD) following its recent agreement to undertake further scrutiny on the matter.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to commission a paper from RalSe on the opportunities and challenges in relation to Anaerobic Digesters.

## **16. Any Other Business**

A Member highlighted the potential impact on the Northern Ireland fishing industry arising from the introduction of new work visa requirements by the Isle of Man Government, considering the high percentage of overseas workers on NI vessels.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to write to the Minister expressing its concerns and to the Isle of Man Government for clarification around the rationale for the introduction of the visa requirements and to raise its concerns on the impact on the local fishing industry.

A Member raised an environmental issue at Bonds Glen Road, Killaloo, Londonderry that has prompted concerned residents to set up an environmental group to engage with Council and the Department on the matter.

The Member advised that the environmental group would send correspondence to the Committee outlining the issues.

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

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 19 February at Room 21, Parliament Buildings at 10:00am.

***The meeting was adjourned at 12:52pm***

**Signature:** .....

**Robbie Butler MLA, Chairperson**

**Dated .....**