Northern Ireland Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

10 November 2026

Meeting location: Room 29, Parliament Buildings

Present: Diana Armstrong (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Tom Buchanan MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Gareth Wilson MLA

Via Zoom: Aoife Finnegan MLA until 10:21am and then in person

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:16am

John Blair MLA joined the meeting at 10:18am

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.

John Blair MLA declared an interest in the Hunting with Dogs Bill.

3. Chairs Business

The Chairperson referred to the Departmental written briefing on Policy Proposals from the Blueprint for TB Eradication.

The Committee noted that the Department has advised that the briefing will not be ready for the meeting on 12 November, and it is now expected to be available for the meeting on 19 November.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to an invitation from the JUSTLANZ research programme for her to attend in her capacity as Chairperson at a Deliberative Workshop on 27 November from 10am - 3pm at Benmore Farm, Lower Lough Erne - exploring the future of land use, food production, and climate action in the Lough Erne landscape.

The Chairperson stated she was unable to attend and asked if the Deputy Chairperson would consider if he was available to attend to represent the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to the Knowledge Exchange Seminar Series (KESS) 9 briefing Floodplain Meadows: Farming with Nature in Areas with Natural Constraint at 1.30pm 11 November in the Long Gallery.

The Chairperson thanked the Deputy Chair who will attend to open the Seminar on behalf of the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to the report from the Examiner of Statutory Rules (ESR) on the Delegated powers regarding the Hunting with Dogs Bill.

The Committee noted that the report found that there are no powers in the Bill under which delegated legislation may be made.

Agreed: The Committee agreed it did not require the ESR to brief it on the report.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 3 November 2026.

5. Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill – Committee Deliberations

The Chairperson referred to the following items:

- The response from Harperstown dated 4 November providing clarification regarding its proposed Amendment to clause 1(2)(c) which was raised during deliberations on 3 November**;**
- A memo from the Committee for the Economy dated 6 November providing a nil response to the Committee's request for views on the Bill;
- Correspondence from the Department dated 6 November in response to queries highlighted by RaISe during their briefing on 20 October; and
- The response from the Department dated 9 November to proposed amendments to Clause 1-3.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the correspondence and agreed to return to consider them at the next meeting.

The Committee agreed to go into closed session to continue Committee deliberations

The meeting went into closed session at 10:21am

The Committee discussed Clauses 4 to 6 in the closed session. It was agreed that a summary of the discussions would be covered by the Clerk in the following Public Session.

The meeting resumed in public session at 10:56am

The Department Officials joined the meeting at 10:57am

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The following Departmental Officials joined the Committee meeting:

- Colin Armstrong - Deputy Director of Water and Marine Policy and Legislation;
- Diane Black – Deputy Director of the Windsor Framework Implementation, Compliance and Marine Enforcement;
- Seamus Connor - Head of Inland Fisheries; and
- Tommy McCormick - Lead Bill Official

The Clerk gave a summary, for the record, of the discussions on Clauses 4 to 6 during the closed session.

Areas of discussion regarding Clause 4 included a request for examples of potential deviations from the Inland Fisheries Policy Statement.

Areas of discussion regarding Clause 5 included the potential need for clearer definitions of fish and aquaculture activities; however, also the potential restrictions, limitations and difficulties that can arise if definitions are put on the face of the Bill as concerns can change over time; the practicality of inclusion of measurable outcomes on the Bill; and the review of the Inland Fisheries Policy Statement.

Areas of discussion regarding Clause 6 included advice from the ESR; potential stakeholder misunderstanding of the Department's duties in the Bill; and the practical difficulties of including fees on the face of the Bill, which would then require primary legislation to enact any future changes.

The Officials then gave an overview of Clauses 7 and 8.

A question and answer session followed, and areas of discussion included the need for clarification if Northern Irish vessels within the NI zone will be subject to enforcement action under English or Welsh law; the definition of reasonable force; and the complaints procedure to challenge the Department's use of reasonable force.

The Officials then gave an overview of Clause 9.

There were no questions from Members in relation to Clause 9.

The Chairperson advised Officials that correspondence would be issued to the Department requesting a response to the matters discussed during the closed and open sessions.

The Committee agreed to go into closed session to continue Committee deliberations

The meeting went into closed session at 11:10am

The Committee discussed Clauses 7 to 9 in the closed session. It was agreed that a summary of the discussions would be covered by the Clerk in the following Public Session.

The meeting resumed in open session 11:48am

6. Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill – Committee deliberations

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The following Departmental Officials joined the Committee meeting:

- Colin Armstrong - Deputy Director of Water and Marine Policy and Legislation;
- Diane Black – Deputy Director of the Windsor Framework Implementation, Compliance and Marine Enforcement;
- Seamus Connor - Head of Inland Fisheries; and
- Tommy McCormick - Lead Bill Official

The Clerk gave a summary, for the record, of the discussions on Clauses 7 to 9 during the closed session.

Areas of discussion regarding Clause 7 included stakeholder confusion concerning the definition of reasonable force and which law will apply outside the NI Zone; proposals for including a binding Departmental commitment to ensure a certain level of resources available for enforcement; and the need to clarify the process for complaints of the use of unreasonable force.

Areas of discussion regarding Clause 8 included clarity for stakeholders that powers are not being imported but are already in existing legislation; and the need for clearer definitions in response to stakeholder concerns of a lack of clear division between inland and sea fishing.

Areas of discussion regarding Clause 9 included the methods available for reporting pollution incidents and Departmental response times; and a comparison between current fines and the inflation-adjusted value of fines set when the original Act was introduced in the 1960s.

The Chairperson advised Officials that correspondence would be issued to the Department requesting a response to the matters discussed during the closed session.

The Chairperson thanked the Officials for their attendance.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11:55am

7. Any Other Business

None

8. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 12 November at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 11:55am

Signature: ……..

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated …….