Northern Ireland Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

20 October 2026

Meeting location: Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

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

The meeting opened in Public Session with a quorum of four 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.

John Blair MLA declared an interest in the Forward Work Programme relating to the Hunting with Dogs Bill.

The Committee moved on to agenda item 5 to commence the evidence session as there was only four Members present at this stage and not a quorum of five to agree minutes.

The Ulster Angling Federation representatives joined the meeting at 10:12am

Gareth Wilson MLA joined the meeting at 10:13am

John Blair MLA joined the meeting at 10:16am

5. Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill Oral Evidence Session – The Ulster Angling Federation

This item was recorded by Hansard

The Chair referred to correspondence, dated 12 October, providing details on the extent to which the proposals and recommendations from the Northern Ireland Marine Task Force (NIMTF) and Northern Ireland Fresh Water Task Force (NIFWTF) had been incorporated into the Bill.

The Chair referred to a response from the Department, dated 14 October, regarding Information held by the Department in relation to all sources of pollution in the Loughs Agency area of responsibility.

The Chair referred to correspondence from the NIFSA, dated 2 September, with its rationale for declining to provide oral evidence to Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to return to the matters during the Committee Bill deliberations.

The following Ulster Angling Federation (UAF) representatives briefed the Committee:

- Jim Haughey MBE - Chairman;
- Ray McKeeman - Director; and
- David Thompson - Club Development Officer

The Committee heard that the UAF supports the purpose of the Bill but would like to see it strengthened with an accountable recovery response after serious harm; effective protection of fish and habitat; clear and proportionate licensing; delivery with dates, resources and public reporting.

The Committee heard that there were concerns the Bill may open the door for more salmon farming, and that serious pollution incidents and significant fish kills should be explicitly excluded from Fixed Penalty Notices.

The Committee also heard a call that the Bill should remove barriers to protect fish passage, habitat and recovering stocks with effective inspections, enforceable conditions and corrective action; and that the Bill should enable a review of aquaculture licences according to environmental risk.

A question and answer session followed, and topics of discussion included:

- The need for clearer guidelines to ensure a consistent approach to issuing penalties;
- The absence of follow up actions from the Department following conclusion of enforcement procedures to assist angling clubs with long term recovery following incidents of fish kills;
- Societal and environmental benefits of participation in angling clubs;
- The need to introduce proportionality of fines and how to deal with repeat offenders;
- Possible merits of introducing regulations regarding hydropower to improve water flow and fish passage, based on environmental impact;
- The need to see increase in compliance and transparency enforcement;
- The level of engagement with angling clubs during public consultations for hydroelectric schemes;
- Efforts to promote angling as a way to enhance the protection of rivers;
- The merits of a having a well funded and well staffed Independent Environmental Agency; and
- If the proposed increase fine limit to £50,000 it is considered to be a sufficient deterrent.

The Uster Angling Association representatives left the meeting at 10:53am

The Committee returned to agenda item 3 as there was quorum of five.

3. Chairs Business

The Chairperson informed Members that the Committee would return to the one item of Chairs Business at the next meeting when further information on the matter will be provided to Members.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 13 October 2026.

The RalSe researchers joined the meeting at 10:54am

Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting at 10:57am

Tom Buchanan MLA joined the meeting at 11:02am

John Blair MLA left the meeting at 11:11am

6. Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill Oral Evidence Session with RalSe

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following RaISe researchers briefed the Committee:

- Mark Allen;
- Suzie Cave; and
- Nathan Mulholland.

The Committee noted it would receive two oral briefings from RaISe on the provisions of the Bill; and on the potential cost implications of the Bill.

The Committee were given an overview on the provisions within the Bill and potential areas for Committee consideration.

The Committee heard the Bill represents a major reform of Northern Ireland's fisheries, aquaculture and water-environment legislation.

The Committee heard that key scrutiny issues for focus have been identified include the breadth of delegated powers under Clause 6; the scale and effectiveness of increased penalties; the scope of Fixed Penalty Notice powers; the balance between primary legislation and future regulations and need for a review mechanism; and whether the Bill is sufficiently comprehensive to address long term fisheries, aquaculture and environmental challenges.

The Committee were then given an overview on the potential cost implications of the Bill.

The Committee heard that the Bill has been introduced within a challenging public finance environment, characterised by significant budgetary pressures and that the EFM identified around £229,000 in staff costs for policy and legislation development up to March 2027.

The Committee heard that future additional costs may be associated with the development of the fixed penalty scheme; recruitment/training authorised officers, implementation of administrative systems; and enforcement measure.

The Committee also noted that the Bill does not specify legislative authority for DAERA to directly receive fine income as funds are paid into the Consolidated Fund of Northern Ireland.

A question and answer session followed, and topics of discussion included:

- If the Bill is an opportunity missed for a wider review and consolidation on fisheries and aquaculture policy;
- Need for clarification as how the various pieces of legislation fit together;
- The potential benefits of an all-island collaborative approach given the cross border dimension;
- The potential benefits of some alignment of enforcement regimes between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland;
- If assurance is needed on staff costs for policy and legislation development after March 2027.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request that it responds to the matters raised in the RaISe research papers.

The Chair thanked the RaISe Officials for their attendance.

The RaISe officials left the meeting at 11:30am

7. Departmental Written Briefing - Synopsis of Consultation Responses on the draft Air Quality (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee considered the briefing providing an update to the public consultation, launched on 8 June, to tighten annual average particulate matter limits, targets and objectives in Northern Ireland and outlining the Department's next steps.

The Committee noted it previously considered the draft SR and following an oral briefing on 28 May it agreed it was content to support the SR, subject to the ESR Report.

The Committee noted the Department states that 84% of the 25 consultation responses support the proposals with widespread support for the proposed annual average limits and targets; and for the development and publication of the draft Northern Ireland Clean Air Strategy, which is currently out for public consultation. However, several local authorities considered the timeframe on the proposed compliance date of 1 January 2028 challenging.

The Committee noted analysis of responses to the consultation shows strong support for the proposals so the Department does not consider that any amendments to the draft SR are required and will ensure it is laid by Negative Resolution by 11 December to allow the Regulations to come into operation in time to have a compliance date of 1 January 2028.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

8. Correspondence

Agreed: The Committee agreed to action the following items of correspondence as detailed in the correspondence memo.

A memo, dated 7 October, from the Clerk to the Committee for Communities regarding the Housing (Amendment) Bill advising it agreed to write to each

Department to request a written update on the breakdown of the cost of homelessness to each Department; the current budget each Department has for homelessness; and details of any planned work or budget bids for the period ahead.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 7 October, from the Clerk to the Committee for Infrastructure seeking the Committee's views on the Display of Flags and Emblems Bill by 23 October.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to submit a nil response.

A memo dated 7 October, from the Clerk to the Committee for Infrastructure seeking the Committee's views on the Harbours Bill by 23 October.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the Committee for Infrastructure to encourage it to consider any potential implications for environmental protection, fishing interests, and rural coastal economies during its scrutiny of the Bill and any connections to the Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill.

A memo dated 7 October, from the Clerk to the Committee for Infrastructure seeking the Committee's views on the Tree Protection Bill Members' Bill by 23 October.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the Committee for Infrastructure to encourage it to explore whether the proposed restrictions could have unintended consequences for agricultural diversification, farm infrastructure projects, or rural development. Also to examine how the proposed planning protections support wider environmental and nature recovery policies led by DAERA including Northern Ireland's first Tree Planting Action Plan launched by the Minister in July designed to accelerate tree planting rates and address factors that have limited woodland expansion.

A memo dated 9 October, from the Clerk to the Committee for Economy advising it agreed to write to DAERA in respect of the interaction of the Regional Balance Bill with the Rural Needs Act.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 8 October, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding Procurement of Replacement Contract for the Supply of Agency Staff.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The 75th Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules which does not refer to any SRs of relevance to the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence that the Committee has been copied into between Defra and the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee providing further updates in a range of matters within the scope of the Windsor Framework relating to rules for the use of certain veterinary medicinal products for the purpose of prevention and control of certain listed diseases; and rules for the prevention and control of certain listed diseases.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) Northern Ireland Newsletter update of 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence from the Law Society, dated 6 October, drawing attention to a book by, Dr Thomas Muinzer, titled The Law Relating to Ownership of Lough Neagh: Contemporary and Historic Problems which examines the history of ownership and governance of Lough Neagh.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence dated 7 October, from Agri Search regarding its briefing paper on potential wildlife intervention options to tackle bovine tuberculosis (bTB) in Northern Ireland prepared in response to the public consultation.

A Member queried when the Committee will be briefed by Officials on bTB and suggested it might be useful for the Committee to receive a briefing from the UFU and from Agri-Search at the same meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Clerk would liaise with Officials on the matter in the first instance.

Correspondence from an individual to the Minister that the Committee has been copied into requesting a response to the latest UK bycatch evidence and seeking stronger safeguards for marine wildlife in Northern Ireland's fisheries.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence from an individual to the Department that the Committee has been copied into regarding storage of solid recovered fuel at Warrenpoint Port.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence dated 9 October from an individual to the NIEA that the Committee has been copied into regarding concerns at the exceedance of permitted annual tonnage at Keady and Glenside facilities of Natural World Products Ltd (NWP).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

9. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

10. Any Other Business

A Member raised the matter of the environmental impact of the continuing deterioration of the weir on the Shimna River in Newcastle.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for Infrastructure suggesting if it would be possible for it to engage with the local council and the Department for Infrastructure to find a resolution to the matter.

11. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 22 October at 10:00am in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson proposed that the Committee would go into closed session to take legal advice on the Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill with Catriona Doherty BL, legal advisor for the Office of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

The Committee noted the legal advice is limited to consideration of whether the provisions of the Bill inappropriately delegate legislative power, and whether the exercise of legislative power provided for is, in each case, subject to an appropriate degree of scrutiny by the Assembly.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to go into closed session to take legal advice on the Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill and that the meeting would adjourn after that session without returning to public session.

The meeting adjourned after the closed session at 11:51am

Signature: ……..

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated …….