Northern Ireland Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

22 October 2026

Meeting location: Room 21 Parliament Buildings

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

Via Zoom: Aoife Finnegan MLA

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:08am

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.

The Chairperson declared an interest due to having a farming background.

Declan McAleer MLA declared an interest in the Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill as the Bill Sponsor, and as the owner and executor of a small farm business.

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

Áine Murphy MLA declared an interest in the Hunting with Dogs Bill as a licensed fire arms holder.

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Minister, dated 15 October, regarding the publication of the outcome of the Independent Review of the Northern Ireland Fishery Harbour Authority (NIFHA).

The Committee considered a copy of the Review and the Department's formal response.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to a note of the informal meeting, on 15 October, between the Chairperson and Craig McGuickan, the NI Lead; and Donnacha Doddy, the Head of Analysis of the Office of Environmental Protection (OEP) to discuss matters of mutual current interest.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to a note of the informal meeting, on Monday 19 October, with Members of the Committee and Nigel Topping, Chair of The Climate Change Committee (CCC) along with Esther Harris, Acting Head of Carbon Budgets; and Stephen Dillon, Senior External Affairs Manager of the CCC.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 15 October 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a response, dated 15 October, from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council regarding the minimum essential requirements for animal handling facilities, which are located away from existing buildings on the farm holding.

The Committee noted it considered the matter on 8 October and agreed to write the Council to seek further clarification on the details of the query.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A Member referred to the draft SR The Farm Sustainability Payment Scheme (Eligibility Etc) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 and suggested seeking clarification from the Department regarding eligibility requirements for the scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek clarification that if in addition to completing the required training, a farm business must also participate in carbon footprinting in order to remain eligible under the Scheme.

A Member suggested that due to considerable interest in the SR from the Ulster farmers Union (UFU), the Committee might find it useful to hear from the UFU prior to the briefing from officials on 12 November.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that following the oral evidence session from Officials on 12 November, it would then consider if further oral evidence were required from the UFU.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 6 October, regarding the Farming with Nature Landscape Projects Scheme.

The Committee noted on 10 September it was briefed by Officials on the matter and agreed to write to the Department requesting further information.

The Committee noted the Department's response provides further information as requested on funding and costs; the application process; scheme outcomes; and scheme delivery.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Irish Council Against Blood Sports representatives joined the meeting via zoom at 10:15am
Daniel McCrossan MLA joined the meeting at 10:24am

6. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Evidence Session with Irish Council Against Blood Sports

The Committee considered the Animal Welfare Report 2024, noting it is a joint publication by DAERA, PSNI and SOLACE.

The Committee noted at the meeting of 15 October it took evidence from Country Sports Ireland and a Member queried how many prosecutions in relation to organised animal cruelty have been brought by the PSNI.

The Committee noted the Report states that during 2024, a total of 65 prosecutions were initiated across all enforcement bodies, which include Councils, and of these, 44 resulted in convictions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request the number of prosecutions for 2025.

The Committee noted that oral evidence on the ANC (Payments) Bill and on the Fisheries and Water Environment Bill is now complete and that there will be final oral evidence on the Hunting with Dogs Bill with Department Officials on 5 November.

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Aideen Yourell – Member, Irish Council Against Blood Sports (ICABS); and
- Francis Ward – Member, Stand with Foxes.

The Committee heard that ICABS considers the Bill to be very comprehensive but that lessons need to be learned from what it believes to be the mistakes made in legislation in the Republic of Ireland, which created a loophole for deer hunting.

The Committee also heard that culling is not an effective conservation method as it creates chaos and forces foxes to take bigger risks and to attack livestock.

The Committee also heard details about the surveys undertaken by Stand with Foxes in the Republic of Ireland.

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

- Animal welfare concerns relating to alternative methods such as poison or traps;
- If there is any evidence of wider public support for a ban on hunting in the Republic of Ireland;
- If there is a general lack of awareness of hunting in the wider public;
- How to protect livestock if the right to carry out pest control is taken away;
- Protective measures that can be taken such as lambing indoors or protective fencing;
- How foxes are protected in other jurisdictions; and
- How to balance cultural traditions with modern animal welfare standards.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The Irish Council Against Blood Sports representatives left the meeting at 10:44am

The Hunting Association NI representatives joined the meeting at 10:44am

7. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Evidence Session with The Hunting Association NI

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The following Hunting Association NI representatives briefed the Committee:

- Susan Vance-Walford;
- Declan Feeney;
- David Turley; and
- Brian Turtle.

The Committee heard of the benefits of hunting as a form of pest control; and concerns at the availability and practicality of alternative methods.

The Committee also heard of the community and cross-border nature of hunting as well as its charitable aspects; and also, of the practical and economic benefits such as the call-out service and the fallen stock scheme.

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

- The Hunting Association NI adherence to the UFU Memorandum of Understanding and code of conduct;
- Actions taken in response to requests from farmers who are opposed to hunt activity on their land;
- Engagement with farmers who have concerns with hunts straying onto their land;
- Actions taken to repair damage to property and protect livestock;
- The possible risk involved in alternative hunts such as drag hunting and clean boot hunting;
- The economic and practical benefits to farmers of the fallen stock scheme;
- If farmers had any concerns that hunting may pose a biosecurity risk;
- The benefits and practicalities of terrier work in hunting; and
- If any potential amendments to the Bill would make it workable.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The Hunting Association NI representatives left the meeting at 11:28am

The Irish Grouse Conservation Trust (IGCT) representatives joined the meeting at 11:28am

The meeting was suspended at 11:30am

The meeting resumed at 11:31am

Aine Murphy MLA rejoined the meeting at 11:33am

John Blair MLA rejoined the meeting at 11:34am

Michelle McIlveen MLA rejoined the meeting at 11:38am

8. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Evidence Session with The Irish Grouse Conservation Trust (IGCT)

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Ian Glendinning – Managing Director; and
- Merlin Becker – Headkeeper

The Committee heard that the Bill would impact the IGCT's conservation work as hunting with dogs is an integral part of its predator control strategy and that a ban would restrict the range of effective predator control methods available, including those used alongside shooting and trapping.

The Committee heard the IGCT is a supporter of animal welfare standards but strongly disagrees with focusing on protecting foxes to the detriment of endangered species.

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

- Concerns that a ban could have unintended consequences;
- The animal welfare advantages derived from terrier work;
- Concerns the Bill will have an adverse impact on the conservation work of the IGCT; and
- If any potential amendments to the Bill would make it workable.

John Blair MLA made reference for the record to his absence, due to a family bereavement, at the Committee's visit in June 2025 to the Glenwherry Hill Farm to witness the conservation work of the ICGT.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The Irish Grouse Conservation Trust representatives left the meeting at 11:58am

The meeting was suspended at 11:58am
The meeting resumed at 12:06pm

The Concerned Residents Group of Artanagh, Shanrod and Fedney representatives joined the meeting at 12:07pm

John Blair MLA rejoined the meeting at 12:07pm

Declan McAleer MLA rejoined the meeting at 12:08pm

Tom Buchanan MLA rejoined the meeting at 12:18pm

9. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Evidence Session with Concerned Residents Group of Artanagh, Shanrod and Fedney

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following Group representatives briefed the Committee:

- Christine Bailey;
- William Bailey; and
- Martin McAleenan.

The Committee heard that farmers need to be legally protected from unwanted hunting activity on their land and that is principally a matter of consent.

The Committee also heard the opposition to uninvited hunting with dogs and all forms of trail or drag hunting is based on concerns regarding damage to crops; injury to livestock and domestic pets; the cost of repairing or replacing hunt-related damage; and the emotional and mental stress experienced.

The Committee also heard of other concerns include biosecurity; verbal threats; and the obstruction of roads.

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

- The effectiveness of the UFU Memorandum of Understanding in dealing with incidents;
- The level of engagement with the UFU;
- The lack of willingness of hunt organisations to take part in engagement with the Residents Group.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The Concerned Residents Group of Artanagh, Shanrod and Fedney representatives left the meeting at 12:27pm.

The Committee moved to Agenda Item 11 as the Departmental Officials were not available.

11. SR 2026/179 The Official Controls (Plant Protection Products) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee noted the SR under the negative resolution procedure will introduce a right of appeal against specified Departmental enforcement decisions on plant protection products, ensuring compliance with Article 7 of the Official Controls Regulation under the Windsor Framework.

The Committee noted on 10 September it agreed to issue a Call for Views which received no responses.

The Committee also noted on 1 October, following a briefing by Officials who advised there had been no changes to policy content since the SL1 was submitted, it agreed that the Department could proceed to make the SR and that subject to Executive approval the SR will come into operation on 30 November.

Agreed: The Committee agreed it had no objection to the SR subject to the report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules.

12. Departmental Written Briefing- Supply Chain Transformation Fund Pilot Scheme (SCTF)

The Committee noted the SCTF is a 3-year challenge fund to be launched in November, will open for applications in early 2027, and will encourage collaboration between pre-farmgate and post-farmgate businesses to address strategic issues impacting the operation of the agri-food supply chain.

The Committee noted the scheme will fund up to 5 projects with maximum grant per project will be £180,000 and the total cost of the Scheme is estimated to be £1.8 million.

The Committee noted applications must demonstrate how they will address at least one of the three strategic priorities areas identified: to improve information flow and transparency; addressing fragmentation and using the supply chain to achieve better strategic outcomes.

The Committee also noted that applications must also align with at least one of the strategic themes - Climate Change; Data/Transparency; Technology; Resilience & Security; Market & Economic Development; Environmental Sustainability; Circular Economy; and Skills Development.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

13. Departmental Written Briefing Sea Fisheries (Amendment and Transitional Provision) Regulations 2026

The Committee noted the Department has consented to Defra making the UK-wide Statutory Instrument (SI) which provides for amendments to assimilated law for Technical measures for commercial fishing in the Irish Sea; and Updates the UK list of vessels identified as engaging in illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing.

The Committee noted DEFRA intends to lay the SI, which is subject to the negative resolution procedure, in Westminster on 29 October and is expected to come into force on 26 November.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

14. Departmental Written Briefing - Update on Planning Improvement Plan (PIP)

The Committee noted the written briefing outlined a range of measures to improve the quality of planning submissions and streamline consultations, which includes an end-to-end review of the planning consultation process which is underway.

The Committee noted that relating to Statutory Performance, the number of outstanding consultations from 2025/2026 has reduced from 627 (17%) on 1 April to 135 (3%) on 25 September 2026 and it is estimated that only 1% of the 2025/26 caseload will remain after the 30 October.

The Committee noted that the NIEA steps to transition the PIP to business-as-usual include a Central Planning Team to promote greater efficiency and a Planning Forum made up of Local Authority planning officers and NIEA case officers will also facilitate regular engagement on operational issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

15. Departmental Written Briefing – Summary of Responses to Consultation for the Introduction of Fixed Fees for Marine EIA Services (Screening and Scoping Opinions)

The Committee noted DAERA, as the marine licensing authority for the Northern Ireland inshore region, provides advice, screening, and non-mandatory scoping opinions to inform applicants' Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) preparation for projects subject to the Marine Works (EIA) Regulations 2007.

The Committee noted the proposed cost recovery fixed fees, which will become effective from 1 November are:

- £600 for a screening opinion;
- £35,259 for scoping opinions for renewable energy projects; and
- £16,472 for all other projects.

The Committee noted the consultation showed broad support for introducing screening and scoping fees; a need for high service standards and clear

communication; exemptions for non-commercial projects; and reinvestment of fee income into the licensing system.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee returned to Agenda item 10

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 12:34pm

10. Oral Briefing from the Department – SL1 - The Digital Waste Tracking Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

This item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted at its meeting on 1 October, it agreed to receive an oral briefing from Officials today and to issue a Call for Views using the Citizen Space platform, which received three responses, which included two Organisations: Antrim and Newtownabbey Council and arc21, and to receive an oral briefing from Officials.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Colin Breen - Assistant Director;
- Keith Carlisle - Head of Branch, Waste Legislation; and
- Christpher Eadie - NIEA

The Committee heard the purpose of the SR being made under draft affirmative resolution procedure and under powers in the Waste and Contaminated Land (Northern Ireland) Order 1997, is to bring into operation the mandatory use of the Digital Waste Tracking (DWT) system to record waste data by any “legal entity” that is registered to receive waste in Northern Ireland.

The Committee heard the DWT will replace the existing set of fragmented systems used to report waste data to track waste from beginning to end and to identify waste that may be illegally exported, stockpiled, dumped or fly-tipped.

The Committee heard that waste crime costs £1bn a year and that the SR will also introduce new offences and penalties and will come into operation in January 2027.

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

- How the Department will measure the objective of reducing illegal waste activity, fly-tipping, and landfill tax fraud;

- If there will be a need for adjustments to councils' household recycling centres;
- If there will be any additional set up cost implications for councils;
- The level of departmental engagement with stakeholders;
- Practical implications for capturing data for cross border waste movements;
- If there has been any Defra engagement with the Republic of Ireland; and
- Consideration of a possible amendment to provide for information sharing with arc21.

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was not yet content to support the draft SR and agreed to write to the Department to request an update following further engagement with stakeholders, including businesses in border areas who will be affected by the regulations.

16. Correspondence

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

A number of revised NIEA Regulatory Fees and Charges 2026-2027:

- Recover the Costs of Processing Licence Applications Under the Water Abstraction and Impoundment (Licensing) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2006;
- Recover the Cost of Processing Discharge Consent Applications and the Regulation of Discharges under the Water (Northern Ireland) Order 1999;
- The Radioactive Substances (Fees and Charges) Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2026;
- Pollution Prevention and Control (Industrial Emissions) Charging Scheme 2026;
- Northern Ireland UK Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme Charging Scheme 2026; and
- Northern Ireland EU Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme Charging Scheme 2026

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 15 October, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding further Follow-up Information received from the Department of Finance on Departmental 5 Year Plans.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 15 October, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding Departmental Budget briefings enquiring if Committees have received written or oral briefing on budgets from its respective Departments within the last four to six weeks.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond to the Committee for Finance to advise that on 8 October it was briefed by Officials who provided an overview of the updated Budget 2029/30 Information Gathering Exercise and outlined the Department's Capital DEL and Resource DEL bids.

A memo dated 15 October, from the Clerk to the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee with a copy of correspondence between Defra and the Chair of the House of Lords Northern Ireland Scrutiny Committee regarding amending Regulation (EU) 2023/1115 as regards certain obligations of operators and traders.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The 76th 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:

- Production and Marketing of Plant-Forest reproductive material;
- Obligations of operators and traders;
- Detergents and Surfactants;
- Production, labelling, and certification;
- Simplification and Strengthening of food;
- Prevention and control of certain listed diseases; and
- composite products exempted from official controls.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence dated 13 October from an individual to the NIEA that the Committee has been copied into regarding an odour complaint at Glenside facilities of Natural World Products Ltd (NWP).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence dated 17 October from an individual requesting that the Committee scrutinise implementation of the Department's response to the OEP April 2026 NAP review in particular to Lough Neagh.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to update the individual when the Committee receives an update from the Department.

Correspondence dated 19 October from an individual to the Minister that the Committee has been copied into regarding Action to reduce marine wildlife bycatch.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

17. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

18. Any Other Business

None

19. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 3 November at 10:00am in Room 30, Parliament Buildings.

The Chairperson then proposed that the Committee go into closed session to take legal advice on the Areas of Natural Constraints (ANC) Payments Bill with Catriona Doherty BL, legal advisor for the Office of the Examiner of Statutory Rules; and to have a short evidence session with the Bill sponsor.

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 Areas of Natural Constraints (ANC) Payments Bill; and to take evidence from the Bill sponsor and that the meeting would adjourn after that session without returning to public session.

The meeting adjourned after the closed session at 1:15pm

Signature: ……..

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated …….