Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

03 November 2026

Meeting location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings

Present: Diana Armstrong (Chairperson)
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Áine Murphy MLA

Via Zoom: Aoife Finnegan MLA

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:12am with a quorum of four, enabling the evidence session to commence.

1. Apologies

Tom Buchanan MLA

Daniel McCrossan MLA

Gareth Wilson 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 an interest in the Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill as a Director of Loughmacrory Community Development Association.

The Committee moved to agenda item 5 to commence the evidence session as only four Members were present at this stage and not a quorum of five to take decisions.

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:14am

Áine Murphy MLA joined the meeting at 10:39am

Michelle McIlveen MLA joined the meeting at 10:43am

Aoife Finnegan MLA left the meeting at 10:44am

5. Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill - Departmental Oral Evidence Session.

This item was recorded by Hansard

The Chair referred to

- The Convention Rights Memorandum (CRM) prepared by the Legal Services Office;
- Correspondence from Aquaculture NI dated 20 October providing suggested amendments to the Bill; and
- A further written submission from Cecilia Zambrano on engineering matters.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Colin Armstrong - Deputy Director of Water and Marine Policy and Legislation;
- Tommy McCormick - Lead Bill Official;
- Seamus Connor – Head of Inland Fisheries; and
- Michelle McNally - Principal Fisheries Officer, Inland Fisheries.

The Committee were given an overview of the Inland Fisheries provisions in Part 1 of the Bill and issues raised by stakeholders during their evidence sessions at Committee stage.

The Committee heard the intention of Part 1 of the Bill is to provide a vehicle to update and modernise the Fisheries Act (NI) 1966 and related legislation; to take an ecosystem-based approach to protect and sustain fishing and aquaculture in Northern Ireland; and to align inland fisheries management with the River Basin Management Planning system provided by the Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017.

The Committee were also given a brief overview of Clauses 1 to 5 covering policy objectives; the policy statement; preparation; publication and laying of the statement; the Department's duties; and interpretation.

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

- The potential impact of the regulations on recreational angling and the economic opportunities and social benefits it brings;
- How to address issues with salmon migration and improving fish pass ability through River Basin Management;
- Possible overlap with the NAP;
- The potential benefit of raising the maximum fine to £50k to address the current low level of prosecutions and improve compliance;
- Other measures to improve compliance;
- The issuing of fish aquaculture licenses;
- Concerns at the level of water extraction on fish migration and fish stocks;
- The timing of the Draft River Basin Management Plan; and
- The Department's intention regarding the promotion of recreational angling.

The Officials left the meeting at 10:41am

The Chairperson expressed condolences to Tom Buchanan MLA due to a family bereavement.

The Committee returned to Agenda Item 3 as there was now a quorum of five.

3. Chairs Business

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from The Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) requesting to present evidence on T*he Farm Sustainability Payment Scheme (Eligibility etc.) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026.*

The Committee noted on 15 October it agreed to hear evidence from Officials on 12 November and on 22 October it agreed that following the oral evidence session from Officials it would then consider if further oral evidence is required from the UFU.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to first take evidence from Officials on 12 November before arranging a date to take evidence from the UFU.

The Chairperson referred to an invitation from AFBI to a breakfast event on Thursday 5th November from 8am to 10am, in the Stormont Hotel to showcase the outcomes from a recent Peer Review of AFBI's science and to highlight AFBI's scientific achievements and discuss future opportunities.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond individually to the invitation.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 20 October 2026.

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

The meeting went into closed session at 10:43am

6. Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill – Committee Deliberations in closed session

The Committee discussed Clauses 1 to 3 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 11:39am

The Department Officials joined the meeting at 11:39am

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

The following Departmental Officials joined the Committee meeting:

- Colin Armstrong - Deputy Director of Water and Marine Policy and Legislation;
- Tommy McCormick - Lead Bill Official;
- Seamus Connor - Head of Inland Fisheries; and
- Michelle McNally - Principal Fisheries Officer, Inland Fisheries.

The Clerk gave a summary, for the record, of the discussions on Clauses 1 to 3 during the closed session, which covered each of the objectives in the Bill and also proposed additional objectives and proposed amendments from.

Areas of discussion regarding Clause 1 included potential to link the Bill to the Climate Change Act but that was then considered not necessary as the proposed suggestions are already laid out in that Act; consideration of the promotion of angling to be added to the Bill as an objective; and a possible duty of promotion of angling being placed on the Department.

Areas of discussion regarding Clause 2 included the inclusion of more regular specific reviews with specific time periods, including possible additional review levers if required.

Areas of discussion regarding Clause 3 included proposed amendments but with concerns that the inclusion of a list that is too prescribed may result in unintended exclusions.

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 Bill Officials left the meeting at 11:44am

8. Any Other Business

None

9. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 5 November at 10:00am in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 11:44am

Signature: ……..

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated …….