Northern Ireland Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

5 November 2026

Meeting location: Room 21 Parliament Buildings

Present:	Diana Armstrong (Chairperson)
	Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
	John Blair MLA
	Daniel McCrossan MLA
	Áine Murphy MLA
	Gareth Wilson MLA
Via Zoom:	Aoife Finnegan MLA

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:11am

1. Apologies

Tom Buchanan MLA

Michelle McIlveen MLA

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.

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

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson advised the Committee that the Review of the Fermanagh Cattle cull operation is now complete and that the Committee is awaiting confirmation of the date the Department will brief the Committee.

The Chairperson referred to a note of the informal meeting on 22 October between the Chairperson, the Deputy Chair and Lorcan O'Dochartaigh - trade representative of the Irish Livestock Exporters Association - to discuss concerns arising for Northern Ireland agriculture, food safety, and public health from the EU Deforestation Regulation and the potential implications of Mercosur-origin meat imports into Great Britain**.**

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request a RaISe briefing on both issues raised at the informal meeting in order to better understand the wider implications of the meat imports.

The Chairperson referred to a note of the informal meeting on 22 October between the Chairperson, the Deputy Chair and Eddie González, MPhil, MA to discuss his doctoral work examining the impacts of Brexit on the everyday lives and economic decisions of dairy, upland sheep, and beef farmers in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to a request from the UFU to brief the Committee on the findings and recommendations of the Andersons Centre report, commissioned jointly by the UFU, Dairy Council for Northern Ireland, AgriSearch and the Livestock and Meat Commission, assessing the impact that bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) has on the potential economic and practical implications for Northern Ireland farm businesses.

The Committee noted that on 20 October it considered correspondence from AgriSearch regarding its briefing paper on wildlife options to tackle bTB and that it will receive a written briefing from the Department on bTB on 12 November.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to consider the contents of the written briefing on 12 November before the Clerk further investigates the potential for a briefing from Officials, the UFU and Agri-Search.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the UFU, dated 30 October, in relation to concerns regarding pig procurement at Sofina Foods, Cookstown requesting that the Committee write to Sofina Foods to highlight the concerns.

The Committee noted that on 15 June it had an informal meeting with the UFU to discuss the implications for Northern Ireland pig producers and wrote to Sofina Foods to outline the concerns and to enquire what the wider ambitions and strategy of Sofina Foods are going forward.

The Committee noted to date there has been no record of any response from Sofina.

The Committee discussed then reflected concern that the Committee should exercise caution and ensure it does not stray into private contractual business matters but also that it was important for the Committee to understand Sofina's rationale as its decisions have a wider economic and animal welfare impact.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write again to Sofina providing the updated situation as outlined by the UFU and enclosing a copy of the Committee letter to Sofina dated 19 June.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 22 October 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 21 October, regarding the Sustainable Farming Investment Scheme (SFIS).

The Committee noted it had discussed the matter on 8 October and agreed to write to the Department seeking further clarity on the arrangements in place to monitor equipment purchased under the Scheme.

The Committee noted the response outlines the conditions applicants agree to as part of the Terms and Conditions of the scheme which can result in penalties if they have not been adhered to, and that the Department also engages in continued monitoring, such as on-site inspections.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 22 October, regarding a request for a further briefing from Dr Blake following the conclusion of the Independent External Review of the Fivemiletown Cattle Cull Operation.

The Committee noted the response states that Dr Blake's remit is to provide a report addressing the matters set out in the published terms of reference and that his engagement will cease once he hands over his final report but that Officials will be available to brief the Committee on the report and the actions being taken to address its recommendations.

Committee discussions included comment that considering Dr Blake's involvement it would be useful to the Committee to have a further briefing from him directly.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to be briefed by Officials on the report and then decide if it wishes to request Dr Blake to attend a separate session.

The Committee considered a response from CAFRE to NIMGA, dated 15 October, regarding concerns NIMGA raised relating to the apparent lack of progress on the Fruit and Vegetable Aid Scheme Successor Scheme (FVAS).

The Committee noted CAFRE Officials are currently considering the approach to stakeholder engagement and a formal timetable has not yet been finalised but will be communicated to stakeholders once established.

Committee discussions included a query regarding the successor scheme being of interest to other sectors, such as apple growers, as it was noted that participants in the most recent FVAS were exclusively from the mushroom sector.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request a breakdown of the number of applications, and the sectors, for the FVAS.

The Committee considered a response from the Department, dated 29 October, on the FVAS and noted that the Department states although it is committed to developing future horticulture support programmes, priority has been given to the implementation and evaluation of the initial Horticulture Pilot Schemes.

The Committee noted that the correspondence also provides an update on the co-design of the successor to the FVAS; a response to concerns raised by NIMGA that the technical amendments to the FVAS will not achieve parity with the sector in the Republic of Ireland; an update regarding the proposed Joint meeting with NIMGA, the Minister with the NIO; and the assistance available to mitigate the rise in energy costs experienced by the mushroom sector.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Áine Murphy MLA joined the meeting at 10:17am

The Committee agreed to go into closed session to commence Committee deliberations on the Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill.

The meeting went into closed session at 10:27am

Daniel McCrossan MLA joined the meeting at 10:44am

6. Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill - Committee deliberations in closed session.

The Committee discussed Clauses 1 to 2 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 11:06am

7. Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill – Committee deliberations

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Clerk gave a summary, for the record, of the discussions during the closed session which covered both Clauses of the Bill, including key points received in evidence and potential amendments. Areas highlighted included:

The impact of the ANC scheme on any future sheep support scheme;

If payments should be linked with environmental outcomes;

- ESR technical queries;
- The potential advantage over other schemes as the ANC payments would be the only scheme that has an index linked inflationary rise;
- The definition of Area of Natural Constraints; and
- The practicality of the regulations coming into operation within 12 months of being granted Royal assent.

A question and answer session followed.

The Bill sponsor responded on the issues raised during the closed session and provided the rationale for the index linked inflationary rise being included in the Bill. The Bill sponsor also stated that he is open to further engagement with the Department on the matters raised including linkage with environmental outcomes and the timeframe for regulations coming into operation.

The Chairperson thanked the Bill sponsor for his attendance and stated that the Committee will return to continue deliberations next week.

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 11:18am

8. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Departmental Evidence session

The Chair referred to further evidence received:

- Correspondence from Steven McGonigal, dated 21 October;
- Correspondence from the Concerned Residents Group of Artanagh, Shanrod and Fedney, dated 22 October;
- A Written Submission from an Individual, dated 2 November**;**
- Additional Written Submission from the Countryside Alliance, dated 2 November; and
- Additional Written Submission from Stand with Foxes, dated 23 October.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Conor Symington - Head of NIEA Wildlife Team; and
- Mark Preston – Head of DAERA Natural Heritage Policy Branch.

The Committee heard details of the Department's assessment of the practical workability and the potential impact on NIEA Business of the Bill.

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

- Possible amendment of the wording of the Bill to more closely align with the Scotland Hunting with Dogs Act, to allay concerns for potential impact on ordinary dog walkers;
- Concerns that penalties introduced would be disproportionate to the existing penalties in the Wildlife (Northern Ireland) Order 1985;
- Concerns regarding the impact on the small NIEA wildlife team if required to provide a support role to the PSNI;
- Possible exemptions regarding certain aspects of trail hunting;
- Potential amendment to allow exemptions for terrier work for control of rats and mice;
- Possible consideration to including a general power in the Bill to make consequential amendments by secondary legislation if issues arise subsequently once the Bill is enacted.

The Chair thanked the Departmental Officials for their attendance.

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11:43am

The Committee agreed to go into closed session to commence Committee deliberations on the Hunting with Dogs Bill

The meeting went into closed session at 11:43am

9. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Committee deliberations in closed session.

The Committee were briefed by the Bill sponsor 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 12:14pm

10. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Committee deliberations

This agenda item was recorded by Hansard

The Clerk gave a summary, for the record, of the discussions during the closed session when the Bill sponsor provided an overview of the evidence received to date and consideration of possible amendments. Areas of discussion included:

- Assurances regarding the potential impact on dog walking issues;
- The potential for consideration of amendment of the two dog limit being hindered by the failure of those opposed to it to identify an acceptable alternative limit;
- Concerns regarding the lack of NIEA resources for any potential enforcement support role;
- Regarding potential for vexatious complaints, it was noted that such claims are not unique to hunting and could arise in relation to any illegal activity;
- Concerns at potential contradictory evidence provided regarding how hunting is an effective method of pest control.

The Committee noted that due to time constraints it did not consider any clauses during the closed session and will commence deliberations on the clauses at the next Thursday meeting.

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 12:18pm

11. Oral Briefing from the Department – Waste Fees and Charges (Amendment No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

This item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted the purpose of the draft SR, subject to the draft affirmative resolution procedure is to give effect to the increase in fees and charges from the Waste Management Charging Scheme (Northern Ireland) 2026/27, which applied from 1 April 2026.

The Committee noted on 8 October it agreed to receive an oral briefing from Officials and to issue a Call for Views, which received no responses.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Keith Carlisle, Head of Branch, Waste Legislation;
- Philip Walker, Head of Budgetary Reporting Branch, NIEA; and
- Colin Millar, Head of Waste Permitting, NIEA.

The Officials provided the Committee with an overview of the regulations.

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

- Assessment of the impact of a 4.02% increase on regulated businesses;
- Concerns that the rise may have a negative impact on waste disposal;
- Concerns at the lack of engagement and communication of the increase with businesses;
- How the proposed increase compares with fee increases applied by equivalent environmental regulators in other UK jurisdictions; and
- Costs involved in enforcement action for noncompliance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was content to support the draft SR subject to the ESR report in the Assembly debate and that the Chairperson would reflect the views of the Committee in her speech in the Assembly debate.

The Departmental officials left the meeting at 12:31pm

The Departmental officials joined the meeting at 12:31pm

12. SL1-The Shellfish Gathering (Conservation) (No.2) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 - Oral Briefing from the Department

This item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted the purpose of the draft SR, subject to the negative resolution procedure and under powers in the Fisheries Act (Northern Ireland) 1966, is to safeguard periwinkle stocks by prohibiting the taking of periwinkles by any means from Strangford Lough during the peak spawning period each year.

The Committee noted DAERA proposed regulations in early 2026 to establish a closed season for periwinkle harvesting across Northern Ireland. However, the regulations were revoked after Committee considered a prayer of annulment, and the Department is now proposing a more targeted closed season in Strangford Lough from January 2027 and has provided processors with 10 months' notice.

The Committee noted on 1 October, it agreed to receive an oral briefing from Officials and to issue a Call for Views, which received 12 completed responses and a written submission from the NIMTF.

The Committee noted there have been further written submissions received from a number of individuals and some on behalf of The Killinchy Rural Preservation Group (KRPG), which are all are in support of the SR.

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Gareth Dillon, Deputy Director, Marine and Fisheries Division;
- Patrick Smith, Sea Fisheries Policy Branch; and
- Suha Ibrahem, Sea Fisheries Policy Branch.

The Committee heard the regulations are intended to ensure the balance of environmental sustainability with the continuing social and economic benefits proved by the fishery, using the best available scientific evidence.

The Committee heard it was considered to be a precautionary approach and a targeted intervention rather than prohibition to protect stock sustainability.

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

- How the Department will monitor compliance with the closed season;

- The resources available to the Department for enforcement;
- The Department's assessment if any commercial periwinkle harvesting is currently taking place without NIEA consent;
- The Department's assessment of the potential impact of the closed season on periwinkle gathers;
- Concerns that there has been no assessment of potential for displacement of gatherers to other areas outside Strangford area;
- If the Department could use existing environmental legislation without having to introduce a closed season;
- Consideration of the approach in other jurisdictions that have no restrictions such as Scotland and the Republic of Ireland; and
- Engagement with the NIMTF regarding concerns around long term sustainability

Agreed: The Committee agreed it was content to support the draft SR subject to the ESR report.

The Departmental officials left the meeting at 12:52pm

13. SL1 - The Greenhouse Gas Emissions Trading Scheme (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 - noting stage

The Committee noted the purpose of the draft SR, subject to the negative resolution procedure, is to amend the Greenhouse Gas Trading Scheme Regulations 2012 to implement the requirements of Directive (EU) 2023/959 as they relate to electricity generation, as necessary under Article 9 and Annex 4 of the Windsor Framework.

The Committee noted the amendments largely relate to administrative requirements and will also provide operators with a choice to remain in the EU ETS when there is a change in production that results in the installation no longer meeting the threshold required to remain in the EU ETS.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note receipt of the SL1 and draft SR, 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 3 December, when it will be briefed by Officials after the Committee has conducted and analysed responses to its Citizen Space survey.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a briefing from Officials is not necessary at this stage.

14. SL1 - The Just Transition Fund for Agriculture Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2027- noting stage

The Committee noted the purpose of the draft SR, subject to the draft affirmative procedure, and under powers conferred by section 31 of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 is to provide the governance, administrative and financial arrangements necessary for the operation of the Just Transition Fund for Agriculture.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note receipt of the SL1 and draft SR, 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 3 December, when it will be briefed by Officials after the Committee has conducted and analysed responses to its Citizen Space survey.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a briefing from Officials is not necessary at this stage.

15. SR 2026/XXXX The Climate Change (Carbon Budget 2038-2042) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee noted the draft SR under the draft affirmative procedure will set the level of the Fourth Carbon Budget, which is intended to provide a mechanism of ensuring that emissions can be reduced in a gradual way which allows for a fair and just transition.

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

The Committee noted that on 17 September, it agreed to issue a Call for Views which received no responses, and following a vote after an oral briefing on 15

October, the Committee was not content to support the draft SR and agreed that the Chairperson would reflect the views of the Committee in her speech in the Assembly debate.

Committee discussions included concern expressed for the potential for costly and bureaucratic rules to be placed on farmers.

Daniel McCrossan wished it noted for the record that he apologised for his absence at the oral evidence session with Officials on 15 October due to his other Committee commitments and stated that he felt there were unanswered questions and if he had been present he would have pressed for further scrutiny.

The Chairperson stated that she is aware of the significant concerns in agricultural community regarding the potential for life stock reduction further down the line and the views of the Committee will be reflected in her speech in the assembly debate.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson left the meeting at 1:03pm and the Deputy Chair chaired the remainder of the meeting.

16. Departmental Written Briefing - UK Deposit Return Scheme legislative change that applies to Wales only

The Committee noted that the SI is expected to be laid in Westminster on 12 November and will add single-use glass containers into the Welsh Deposit Return Scheme (DRS).

The Committee noted the Welsh Government requested an exclusion to enable glass drink containers to be included in their DRS and it will have no impact on the DRS in Northern Ireland, England or Scotland, which will include single-use drinks containers from 150 ml to 3 litres made of polyethylene terephthalate plastic, steel and aluminium.

The Committee noted that producers here placing relevant products on the Welsh market may need to comply with the Welsh scheme requirements in respect of glass drink containers.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

17. Correspondence

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

A memo dated 22 October, from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy seeking views by 4 December regarding the Credit Unions (Amendment) Bill which passed Committee Stage on 3 November.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Committee for the Economy to encourage it to consider if the Bill's reforms will genuinely improve access to affordable financial services in rural areas, where bank branch closures, longer travel distances and digital exclusion can create particular challenges.

A memo dated 22 October, from the Clerk to the Committee for the Economy regarding Wastewater Infrastructure Issues.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 22 October, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn – September (R6) Position.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 26 October, from the Clerk to the Committee for Communities, enquiring if the Committee has previously considered correspondence from the community-led group RAIN (Residents against Incineration).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to respond, advising that on 25 June it considered correspondence from RAIN requesting a meeting to discuss its concerns at a proposal by AIC Group to develop a waste incineration facility in Benburb, and had agreed to add the group to the informal meeting list.

The Youth Assembly - October Update.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Items of 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:

- formaldehyde and formaldehyde releasers;
- entry of consignments of certain animals, germinal products, and products of animal origin; and
- adding twelve co-formulants which are not accepted for inclusion in plant protection products.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A copy of a report from Visual Artists Ireland report titled The Arts: our role in the Future of Northern Ireland

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The findings of a youth-led research project through NI Youth Forum report titled Your Voice, Our Future.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A copy of a Briefing prepared by Northern Ireland Environment Link's Sustainable Agricultural Policy Working Group (SAPWG) regarding Farm Carbon Calculators and Agricultural Support.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Investing Activity Report for October 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A circular notifying that the Government has announced landfill tax rebate scheme for Defra and Councils.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The PRISM Year 3 Supply Chain Summary Report examining reducing emissions across the beef and lamb supply chain.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission October 2026 E-Newsletter.
Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.
Correspondence dated 20 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.

Correspondence dated 20 October from an individual to the Department the Committee has been copied into regarding a Raising a Concern investigation into NIEA's regulation of Re-Gen Waste Ltd at Warrenpoint Port.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A briefing paper provided from an individual regarding the consistency of the approach taken by different councils in assessing applications for the Rural Business Development Grant Scheme 2026/27.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward the paper to the Department for its response.

18. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

19. Any Other Business

A Member commented on the success of the Rural Business Development Grant Scheme 2026/27 which is due to open again for applications in Spring 2027.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to encourage its review of the scheme and if possible allocate increased funding for the next round of applications.

Members raised the issue of river pollution events including in the River Folly, Armagh and the Inler River, Comber.

A Member also raised the issue of the NIEA response to salmon poaching on the River Mourne in contrast to its response to pollution events.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the NIEA to request a written briefing setting out the procedures it follows in response to reports of pollution events specifying how events are prioritised; and how it responds to reports of poaching.

20. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 10 November at 10:00am in Room 29 Parliament Buildings.

The meeting adjourned at 1:16pm

Signature: ……..

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated …….