



Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

10 September 2026

Meeting location: Room 21 Parliament Buildings

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

Via Zoom: Aoife Finnegan MLA
Daniel McCrossan MLA

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:07am

The Chairperson thanked Members for the welcome she has received and thanked the previous Chairperson, Robbie Butler MLA, for his work and dedication to the Committee.

1. Apologies

Tom Buchanan 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 and to an item of AOB relating to Cleggan Quarry in County Fermanagh having written regarding the matter, in early July, on behalf of a constituent to the Mid Ulster District Council Planning Department.

Declan McAleer MLA declared an interest in the Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill and that he is an executor and owner of a small farm in Co Tyrone.

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

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

Daniel McCrossan MLA joined by zoom at 10:19am

Áine Murphy MLA joined the meeting at 10:27am

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to a short note providing an overview of the informal introductory meeting she had with Minister Muir at his invitation on 3 September.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence dated 4 September the Committee has been copied into from David Brown (former UFU president) to Dr Martin Blake regarding concerns in connection with a previous cattle cull in Fivemiletown,

The Committee noted the incident was referred to at the informal meeting with Dr Blake on Monday 7 September.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to a note providing an overview of the informal meeting the Committee had with Dr Blake on 7 September to discuss his independent review into the DAERA cattle cull incident.

Some Members expressed concerns regarding perceptions around Dr Blake's independence and requested further information on the rationale for his selection. Some action points coming out of the informal meeting were discussed and agreed.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to ask if Rural Support could act as a conduit to witnesses who may be reluctant to come forward to provide evidence to Dr Blake.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to put on record that no documentation, electronic or hard copy, that may be in anyway relevant should be destroyed or deleted going forward.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Dr Blake to request that:

- The report includes other examples of when the Humane Slaughter Team was called upon outside this jurisdiction, for what reason and how those operations were conducted;
- The report to look back over the issues and determine where delays occurred in dealing with the animal welfare implications on this particular farm - at DAERA level or during the legal process, in light of the long-standing animal welfare problems on the farm in question;
- The report establishes the pattern of previous DAERA cull operations over a period of time of at least 10 years, with or without ministerial sign off given that there was not always a Minister in post, in order to draw comparisons with the operation of June 2026;
- Dr Blake keeps the Committee up to date with the progress of the review and report and return to brief the Committee in public session once it is complete.

The Chairperson referred to a request from the President of the North of Ireland Veterinary Association (NIVA) requesting that she, in her capacity of Chair, sponsor

a workshop meeting on Wednesday 7 October in Parliament Buildings on the topic of farm animal endemic disease

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Chairperson would sponsor the event.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the Chief Executive of Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) offering to meet with her, in her capacity as Chair, to discuss environmental priorities and also with the Sustainable Agriculture Policy Working Group (SAPWG) to see how they can support the Committee's scrutiny role.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Clerk in the first instance would arrange an informal meeting for the Chairperson and the Deputy Chair.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from Dogs Trust expressing its concerns regarding animal welfare issues and the lack of legislative progress on the commitments outlined in the Animal Welfare Pathway.

The Committee noted the Trust has offered to provide evidence to the Committee on these matters and offered an invitation to visit the Ballymena Homing Centre.

The Committee noted on 11 June it had agreed to forward to the Dogs Trust an update from the Department dated 26 February on the progress of legislation that it had previously considered on 5 March.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to DAERA for an update on the progress of the legislation.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add Dogs Trust to the list of potential evidence sessions and visits.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence from the UFU requesting an engagement opportunity with the Committee and UFU/YFCU Next Generation Forum.

The Committee noted it considered a previous request from the Forum at the meeting on 16 April and agreed to add an informal meeting to the forward work programme.

The Committee noted the limited time it had going forward before the end of the mandate and that the Committee Team would provide Members with a list of agreed informal meetings and potential visits for further prioritisation in due course.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee team write to the Next Generation Forum to confirm that it is already on the list of informal meetings.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence dated 25 August from Farmers For Action requesting an informal meeting with the Committee to discuss issues that farmers in Northern Ireland are facing.

The Committee noted it had already conducted a significant piece of work on the FFA proposals in this mandate and had sought legal advice on a Bill proposed by them.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence dated 28 August from the Chairperson of the Northern Ireland Horse Board (NIHB) regarding concerns on the potential impact upon horse breeders due to issues that have arisen concerning Horse Sport Ireland - the National Governing body for equestrian sport.

The Committee noted the NIHB are calling for a return to the arrangement in place up until 2018 by which they acted as a joint issuing body with the Irish Sport Horse and Irish Draught Horse Studbooks.

The Committee noted NIHB has requested to meet with the Committee to discuss the concerns and to encourage DAFM to support its request.

Agreed: The Committee agreed in the first instance to copy the correspondence to DAERA and DAFM and request their comments on the issues raised.

The Chairperson referred to a request from individual undertaking postgraduate research to meet her in her capacity as Chairperson to discuss his research examining the impacts of Brexit on the everyday lives and economic decisions of sheep, beef, and dairy farmers in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a meeting with the Chair and Deputy Chair be arranged.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence dated 4 September from Save Our Acute Services (SOAS), requesting an informal meeting to discuss rural health inequalities and the impact of the suspension of Emergency General Surgery at SWAH on rural patients, families and communities.

The Committee noted it considered this request on 30 April and agreed to arrange a meeting in the Autumn.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange an informal meeting with SOAS.

The Chairperson referred to an invitation from the Livestock and Meat Commission for her in her capacity as Chairperson to join its delegation at the SIAL Food and Beverages Trade Fair in Paris taking place between 17 October and 21 October. The Chair felt it was not suitable at this time as she needed to focus on Committee remit and the Bills.

Agreed: Committee agreed that due to the need to focus on current workload the Chairperson would instead offer to meet them informally after the event.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence dated 2 September from an individual regarding local residents' concerns in connection with a planning application made by Blakiston-Houston Estates at Carrowreagh Road, Dundonald.

The Committee noted the individual has expressed concerns at what has been perceived as the Committee's apparent support and endorsement of the planning application.

The Committee noted it visited Blakiston-Houston Estates on 26 June 2025 and that the intention of that visit was fact-finding and to observe and understand the SULS Project and was not in regard to planning support and that no letter in support or of objection to the planning application was sent.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that a reply to the individual is issued regarding the purpose of the visit.

The Chairperson referred to correspondence dated 25 August from Cats Protection requesting an opportunity to discuss current issues with an invitation to visit the Cats Protection Centre in Dundonald.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the group to the list of potential visits.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 2 July 2026 and 10 August 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a response, dated 24 July, from the British - Irish Council in reply to its letter regarding issues facing the Northern Ireland Fishing Industry.

The Committee noted the response stated that the Council does not have a dedicated work sector covering fisheries policy and advised of other existing forums better suited to address the industry's concerns.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered a response, dated 20 July, from the Chief Minister of the Isle of Man (IOM) government regarding the impact of Isle of Man access restrictions on the Northern Ireland Fishing industry. The Committee noted it considered the response at the meeting on 10 August and agreed to return to the matter at this meeting.

Members expressed disappointment at the response and noted that Minister Muir had met with the IOM Ministers in April to discuss the matter.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to forward IOM letter to ANIFPO and NIFPO and request that they respond with any comments they wish to make.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request an update on any meetings and communications it has had with the IOM Government on the matter since April 2026.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 19 August, from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council regarding a report on the issues facing rural areas identified through research delivered to its Rural Affairs Sub-Committee.

The Committee noted it had previously corresponded with the Council on this matter in June 2025 and the Committee then agreed to seek a written briefing in the first instance from the Rural Affairs Sub Committee on its research. The Committee noted the Sub-Committee would welcome the opportunity to brief the Committee.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Rural Affairs Sub-Committee to encourage them to share its research with other government departments.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the Fermanagh and Omagh District Council Rural Affairs Sub-Committee to the list of informal meetings.

The Committee considered a response, dated 3 September, from DAERA in reply to queries regarding the written briefing on the Tree Planting Action Plan, which the Committee considered on 2 July.

The Committee noted the response provides some further clarification as to how the loss of woodland resulting from storm damage is measured, assessed, and quantified; the methodology used to record woodland losses within forestry and afforestation statistics; and whether woodland losses caused by storm events are reflected in progress reporting against forestry planting and afforestation targets.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Woodland Trust to ask if they wish to comment on the Action Plan.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to arrange an informal meeting with the Woodland Trust, Chair and Deputy Chair after receipt of a written response from the Trust on the Tree Planting Action Plan.

The Committee considered the response from the Department, dated 7 August, regarding its request for consideration of the development of a Framework for Resilience for the Fishing Sector in Northern Ireland, similar in scope and ambition to that produced for the agricultural sector.

The Committee noted Officials have begun preliminary scoping work on the potential development of a Fisheries Resilience Framework. A Member expressed concern at the apparent lack of urgency and that no time frame for the completion of the preliminary work has been provided.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to Department requesting it gives more urgency to the matter and provide timescales for completion of the scoping exercise and regular updates on progress of a Fisheries Resilience Framework.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 12 August, from the Department providing notification that Dr Martin Blake had been appointed to carry out the Independent External Review of DAERA's Implementation of the Fivemiletown Deprivation Order.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence dated 1 September from Farmers for Action offering its views on the cull; the Committee meeting of 10 August; and the Independent External Review.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence, dated 4 September, from the Committee for the Economy regarding the rescheduling of a briefing from the

Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) in respect of its review of the domestic heating oil market.

The Committee noted a joint briefing was scheduled for 1 July, which was postponed and it was expected to be rescheduled after recess.

The Committee noted that the Economy Committee stated that due to its time pressures, it agreed to receive a briefing from the CMA at its Committee meeting on 9 September.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request that the Economy Committee provide a written note of the meeting and share any relevant papers with the Committee.

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:37am

6. Departmental Oral briefing session - The Farming with Nature Landscape Projects

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Manus McHenry, Deputy Director, Agricultural Policy Division; and
- Kevin Duncan, Head of Landscape Projects.

The Committee heard that the Landscapes Project is one of three strands of the Farming with Nature Package and is expected to launch in Autumn 2026 and is the replacement for the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS)

The Committee also heard its aim is to support farmers and stakeholders working collaboratively to undertake landscape-scale projects to improve biodiversity and habitat connectivity and to encourage innovation through bespoke landscape actions.

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

- How the scheme differs from the EFS;
- Details of incentivisation offered to participants;
- Lessons learnt from the previous EFS and how it informed the new scheme;
- Allocation of funding for the scheme;

- Concerns regarding potential double funding issues; and
- How the scheme will be monitored and expected outcome targets.

Agreed: The Committee requested that the Officials provide the Committee with the briefing paper Officials referred to in the meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to request further information regarding funding for the scheme and to clarify the criteria applied to determine prioritisation of projects.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

Aine Murphy left the meeting at 11:07am

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 11:12am

The meeting was suspended at 11:12am

The meeting resumed at 11:26am

The RalSe officials joined the meeting at 11:26am

Aine Murphy rejoined the meeting via zoom at 11:30am

7. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Oral Evidence from RalSe

This item was recorded by Hansard

The Committee noted it had received the legal advice it commissioned on the Bill from Assembly Legal Services related to correspondence from the Countryside Alliance. The Chairperson highlighted that the legal advice is privileged and restricted and read a short summary as agreed with Legal Services.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that it was content the issues are well covered in the written advice and an oral briefing from Legal services in private session was not required.

The Committee considered further correspondence from Countryside Alliance Ireland, dated 14 August, and correspondence from NoISE outlining some procedural concerns.

The Bill sponsor John Blair MLA stated that the legal matters referred to in correspondence from the Countryside Alliance is not related to the contents and purpose of the Bill and is related to positions he held before he became an MLA.

The Chairperson, in response to the procedural issues raised by the stakeholders, stated that the Committee is committed to ensuring that the Committee Stage of the Hunting with Dogs Bill is carried out in line with all relevant Assembly procedures and Standing Orders.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department of Justice, dated 3 September, in response to the letter of 11 August seeking its views on the Bill.

The Committee considered the Bill Stakeholders Invitation and Response List up to 7 September 2026 for all three Bills that are in Committee Stage.

The Committee noted requests from additional organisations and an individual to provide oral evidence on the Hunting with Dogs Bill from:

- National Association of Regional Game Councils (NARC) and FACE Ireland - the European Federation for Hunting and Conservation;
- Irish Working Terrier Federation;
- Country Sports Ireland; and
- Irish Grouse Conservation Trust

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the additional organisations to the oral evidence list.

The Committee considered items of correspondence from individuals offering their views on the Bill and noted that all the correspondence will form part of the evidence base and included in the summary tables of evidence.

Concerns were expressed that the timeline for completion of the Committee Stage may be affected if there are additions to the oral evidence list. The Clerk advised that there has been contingency built into the schedule to accommodate a limited number of additions to the main agreed list.

The Committee considered other requests for oral evidence in relation to the Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill from:

- Harperstown Power Ltd on behalf of the British Hydropower Association; and
- Cecillia Zambrano - a naval engineer with practical experience in environmental telemetry and wastewater-sector monitoring

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add Harperstown Power Ltd on behalf of the British Hydropower Association to the oral evidence list.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to accept written evidence from Cecillia Zambrano on engineering matters.

Hunting with Dogs Bill – Oral Evidence from RalSe

The Committee moved on the [two] oral briefings from RalSe on the provisions of the Bill; and on the potential cost implications of the Bill.

The following RalSe Officials briefed the Committee:

- Mark Allen; and
- Aidan Stennet

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 significant change in wildlife management and animal welfare policy in Northern Ireland and raises a number of legal, practical, enforcement and policy issues that would require Committee scrutiny.

The Committee heard that several areas where further clarification may be required have been identified including definitions of Participation; Cover; Organising; and Dogs being "under control".

The Committee heard that the absence of definitions which may create challenges for enforcement agencies, prosecutors; landowners; and individuals undertaking exempt activities.

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 would impact on budgets of DAERA; PSNI; the Prison Service; and the Court Service.

Commented [JT1]: Nick - add in agenda item title

Commented [NF2R1]: added

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

- Absence of definitions within the Bill;
- Potential for statutory guidance to ensure consistency in approach and to assist with enforcement;
- Protection for dog walkers;
- Possible exemptions to activities;
- Possible effect of the introductions of licensed activities;
- Workability of the two dog limit in relation to predator control;
- Defence provisions within the Bill; and
- Absence of a mechanism for DAERA to use income generated from fines;

The Chair thanked the RalSe Officials for their attendance.

John Blair MLA put on record that he would be content to engage further on any issues or queries with Officials and Committee Members.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to request that John Blair MLA come back with a response to the Committee on the various issues and queries highlighted in the RalSe research papers.

The RalSe officials left the meeting at 12:31pm

John Blair MLA put on record that he did not attend the Committee visit to Glenwherry Hill Farm on 3 July 2025 due to a family bereavement.

8. SL1-The Official Controls (Plant Protection Products) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026- NOTING STAGE

The Committee noted that the purpose of the SR, subject to the negative resolution procedure, is to give effect in Northern Ireland to Article 7 (Right of Appeal) of Regulation (EU) 2017/625 ("the Official Controls Regulation" (OCR)), as applicable under the Windsor Framework, in respect of official controls on plant protection products (PPPs).

The Committee noted that Officials are scheduled to brief the Committee on the SR on 01 October.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note receipt of the SL1 and proposed statutory rule 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 1 October, when it will be briefed by Officials after the Committee has conducted and analysed responses to the Citizen Space survey.

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

9. Departmental Written Briefing - Northern Ireland Elasmobranch Conservation Strategy 2026-2035

The Committee noted the biodiversity of elasmobranch species is a direct indicator of ocean and ecosystem health and the development of a conservation strategy in response to declines in elasmobranch populations both nationally and globally due to issues including overfishing, bycatch, pollution and impacts of climate change on habitats.

The Committee noted responses to the proposed aim and objectives were generally well received by stakeholders, with some common themes emerging including:

- Prioritising monitoring and data collection to address gaps and improving the sharing of data;
- Long-term, ring-fenced funding to enable implementation of measures; and
- Improvements in education, awareness and enforcement

The Committee also noted the proposed Strategy is consistent with the position in the rest of the United Kingdom, with similar initiatives launched in other jurisdictions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the briefing.

10. Correspondence

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

Correspondence from the Department dated 27 August providing notification of the launch on 1 September of the 8 week consultation for The Draft of Northern Ireland's first dedicated Clean Air Strategy.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note and receive a briefing after the consultation in due course.

Notification from the Department dated 7 August that the Minister has Designated Lagan Meadows as a Quiet Area following the consultation that closed on 27 July.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence from the Department dated 3 September advising that the Implementation date for the introduction of voluntary bovine Electronic Identification (EID) was 7 September.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence from the Department dated 4 September providing notification of the forthcoming publication of the Consultation on Amendment to Free Allocation Rules for Hydrogen Production in the UK Emissions Trading Scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 27 August from the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee giving notification of the publication of its report into the replacement EU act concerning Circularity Requirements for Vehicle Design and on Management of End-of-Life Vehicles.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 27 August from the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee giving notification of the publication of its report into the replacement EU acts concerning the strengthening of the position of farmers in the food supply chain.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The 71st Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules which refers to S.R. 2026/116: The Conservation (Natural Habitats, etc.) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 which is not drawn to the attention of the Assembly.

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.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A request from the AERA Committee of the YFCU to meet with to discuss issues affecting the agricultural and rural sector in Northern Ireland.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note that the YFCU are already on the list of potential briefings.

A report from the RSPB titled Powering Healthy Seas: Turning a Vision into Reality

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

An invitation from David Honeyford MLA to the Centre for Cross Border Cooperation's Research Priorities Seminar on Wednesday 23 September, in the Long Gallery from 3.30-5.00pm.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The ISNI Delivery Tracking System - Investing Activity Report, dated 30 August 2026

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence dated 13 August from R Hill and Co regarding the DAERA Cattle Cull Incident, providing some lines of inquiry it recommends the Committee consider regarding scrutiny on the matter.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note

The September 2026 Pivotal Report.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note

Correspondence dated 18 August to the NIEA that the Committee have been copied into from an Individual regarding concerns in relation to the waste management licence to Re-Gen Waste Ltd at Warrenpoint.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note

Correspondence dated 26 August from an Individual regarding concerns that the Department is in breach of its statutory environmental duties imposed by the Water Environment (Water Framework Directive) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2017 in relation to Lough Neagh.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note

11. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

12. Any Other Business

The Committee considered an item of AOB from John Blair MLA regarding a request from an individual for scrutiny of environmental regulation in relation to a planning application for an extension to Cleggan Quarry in County Fermanagh.

John Blair MLA stated that he was bringing the matter to the Committees attention as it had previously enquired about Shared Environmental Services (SES) and its role in environmental planning.

The Committee noted it had previously received correspondence from SES on its role.

Agreed: The Committee agreed that the Committee team would reissue the letter from SES to Members for further consideration.

The Committee considered an item of AOB from Daniel McCrossan MLA regarding uncertainty for businesses due to proposed changes to the regulations for the purchase of fresh cooking oil and regulations for the disposal of waste cooking oil.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to seek clarification regarding the differing regulatory approach used in the purchase of fresh cooking oil and the disposal of waste cooking and which regulations will apply from 2027.

The Deputy Chair formally welcomed the Chairperson to the Committee and proposed that the Committee issue a letter of gratitude to the former Chairperson.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write a letter of thanks to the former Chairperson, Robbie Butler MLA.

13. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 15 September at 10:00am in the Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned 12:51pm

Signature:

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated