



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

# Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

## Minutes of Proceedings

13 October 2026

**Meeting location: Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings**

**Present:** Diana Armstrong (Chairperson)  
Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)  
John Blair MLA  
Tom Buchanan MLA  
Michelle McIlveen MLA  
Gareth Wilson MLA

**Via Zoom:** Aoife Finnegan MLA until 10:28am, then in person  
Áine Murphy MLA

***The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:07am***

### **1. Apologies**

Daniel McCrossan MLA

## **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, as the Bill Sponsor, in an item of Chairperson's Business relating to the Hunting with Dogs Bill.

## **3. Chair's Business**

The Chair referred to a request from Mr Steven McGonigal to provide evidence to the Committee on the Hunting with Dogs Bill on 15 October on behalf of the Irish Working Terrier Federation (IWTF).

The Committee noted that Mr McGonigal gave evidence on behalf of NoISE Coalition on 17 September and that although he states that it was not his intention to attend on behalf of the IWTF, a witness is now unavailable, and he is involved considerably in both groups.

The Committee also noted Mr McGonigal states that the two organisations and presentations will differ as NoISE Coalition focused on hunting with dogs in the broader sense, and the IWTF is a specific group and will present on the use of terriers below ground only.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed that Mr McGonigle could attend a second evidence session to give evidence on behalf of IWTF.

## **4. Minutes**

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 6 October 2026.

***The NI Water representatives joined the meeting at 10:10am***

**5. Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill Oral Evidence  
Session – NI Water**

***This item was recorded by Hansard***

The Chair referred to correspondence from the Department, dated 12 October, regarding proposed amendments which have been approved by the Minister to Clauses 6 and 15 of the Bill.

**Agreed:** The Committee agreed to note the correspondence and to return to consider the amendments in detail during its deliberations on the Bill.

The following NI Water representatives briefed the Committee:

- Angela Halpenny - Head of Environmental Regulation; and
- Orla Crothers - Head of Climate Change and Wastewater Regulation Reform Program

In relation to penalties and enforcement, the Committee heard the increase in financial penalties to £50,000 would reduce resources available to NI Water for investment and environmental improvements.

NI Water welcomed wastewater regulatory reform but was concerned it could lead to an increase in Article 12 Enforcement Notices and without additional funding, it may be unable to fulfil all notice requirements, increasing the likelihood of non-compliance and the imposition of financial penalties.

In relation to the introduction of Fixed Penalty Notices, the Committee heard that it will not provide an immediate deterrent to non-compliance in respect of minor and moderate breaches of legislation, as these offences are largely attributable to actions by third parties.

The Committee also heard that NI Water would like to see further information and details of the proposed penalties in order to quantify the potential impact they would have on NI Water.

The Committee heard that sustained underinvestment in infrastructure over many years has led to challenges such as ageing assets, and that NI Water's Price Control

(PC) 28 Business Plan 2028-2033 has identified £13 billion of current need and £3 billion of investment as the minimum acceptable level required for water and wastewater services.

The Committee also heard that without funding increases there will be a delay in infrastructure investment, house building, and an impact on efforts to bring about environmental improvements.

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

- The impact of current funding constraints on investment in infrastructure;
- Whether infrastructure constraints, rather than operational failings, have been the primary cause of pollution incidents;
- Whether financial challenges have become a barrier to, or excuse for, failing to make required improvements;
- Actions taken by NI Water to minimise third party pollution, including education campaigns to promote greater public responsibility for preventing blocked sewers and protecting waterways from pollution;
- The need for clearer guidelines to ensure a consistent approach to issuing penalties;
- Steps to improve monitoring of NI Water pollution entering Lough Neagh and Strangford Lough through the increased installation of Event Duration Monitors on storm overflows;
- The potential effect of the proposed increase in fines, from £20,000 to £50,000, on NI Water's financial position, reducing the resources available to NI Water for delivering environmental improvements;
- The possible impact of the proposed withdrawal from SORPI;
- Discussions NI Water have had with DAERA, utility regulators and stakeholders regarding funding requirements linked to future compliance obligations;
- A proposal from NI Water for revenue from fines to be earmarked for environmental improvements instead of being transferred to the Consolidated Fund.

In response to a Committee query, the NI Water Officials advised they would provide the Committee with an estimate of the number of homes and businesses that would be affected by the removal of SORPI.

***The NI Water representatives left the meeting at 10:44am***

***The Harperstown Hydropower Ltd representatives joined the meeting at 10:44am***

**6. *Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill Oral Evidence Session - Harperstown Hydropower Ltd and HydroNI Ltd***

***This item was recorded by Hansard***

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Andrew Frazer - Director, Harperstown Power Ltd; and
- Trevor McBurney - Director, HydroNI Ltd

The Committee heard that although the representatives supported the protection of fish stocks and the wider aquatic environment, the Bill is not considered fit for the modern era, as it does not recognise the benefits associated with hydropower and the restoration of the NI mill system, such as renewable-energy, energy security, rural employment and investment, and the restoration of habitats.

The Committee also heard concerns that the Bill would grant the Department substantial additional powers without providing sufficiently clear safeguards or assessment of effectiveness. Also, it is not clear how the proposed powers and increased penalties will bring about improvements, such as increasing fish populations or addressing significant pressures occurring outside inland waters, including salmon mortality at sea.

The Committee also heard concerns that more regulation will create barriers to the redevelopment, maintenance, and operation of hydropower schemes.

The Committee heard that any proposed changes must be evidenced-based to support any alleged offence; transparent; have financial penalties proportionate to environmental damage; and include good governance and accountability for all, including the Department.

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

- The gradual improvement in engagement by DAERA with the Hydropower industry;
- Concerns at the perceived lack of vision detailed in the Bill;
- The impact of the decline of the working mill system in Northern Ireland.
- Concerns at the complex, cross Departmental and lengthy mill restoration permit application process;
- How the restoration of the mill infrastructure would provide a source of renewable energy and help create habitat to support fish stocks and provide local employment opportunities;
- Proposed amendments to make the Bill workable, proportionate, and relevant to current circumstances; and
- Concerns that the title of the Bill is misleading and too narrow in scope.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

***The Harperstown Hydropower Ltd representatives left the meeting at 11:38am***

## **7. Any Other Business**

None

## **8. Date and Time of Next Meeting**

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 15 October at 10:00am in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

***The meeting was adjourned 11:38am***

**Signature: .....**

**Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson**

**Dated .....**