



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

15 September 2026

Meeting location: Senate Chamber, Parliament Buildings

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

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:17am

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.

John Blair MLA declared an interest as a former DAERA employee.

The Aquaculture NI representatives joined the meeting at 10:19am

Tom Buchanan MLA joined the meeting at 10:24am

John Blair MLA left the meeting at 10:26am

Aoife Finnegan MLA joined the meeting at 10:41am

3. Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill Oral Evidence Session - Aquaculture NI

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Rod Cappell - Aquaculture NI Facilitator;
- Bram Verwijs - Premier Seafarmers / Emerald Mussels; and
- Raymond Mairs - Glenoak Fisheries

The Committee heard that Aquaculture NI cannot support the Bill in its current form as it will worsen the Department's current practice of implementing regulation in isolation, disproportionately and without adequate support or a plan to enable growth of the sector.

The Committee also heard that co design was only evident regarding Aquaculture licensing and not in relation to any other elements of the Bill.

The Committee heard that Bill does not do enough to unlock the opportunity to grow the farmed mussels industry to help control the excess algal growth in Belfast Lough and displays a lack of recognition from the Department of the environmental benefits of aquaculture.

The Committee also heard that there is a need for an Inland Fisheries Policy and an Aquaculture Development Policy to enable future proofing of land based aquaculture; a streamlining of the licensing process; and a new, comprehensive Regulatory Impact Assessment.

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

- Concerns at the lack of experienced staff with the Department and resourcing issues;
- The need for the Department to show a commitment to the formation of an aquaculture development policy;
- The potential for a new source of sustainable seed to produce more mussels, support coastal employment and attract investment;
- The need for an aquaculture development to include all sub sectors including those operating in both fresh and salt water; and
- Lack of confidence in the Departments decision making process

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

The Aquaculture NI representatives left the meeting at 11:00am

The Lough Neagh Rivers Trust representatives joined the meeting at 11:01am

Aine Murphy MLA joined the meeting at 11:03am

John Blair MLA rejoined the meeting at 11:06am

Michelle McIlveen MLA joined the meeting at 11:25am

4. Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill oral evidence session - Lough Neagh Rivers Trust.

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following Lough Neagh Rivers Trust representatives briefed the Committee:

- David Kennedy – Chairperson, Lough Neagh Rivers Trust;
- Allen Fleming - Lough Neagh Rivers Trust Member and Chair of Crumlin and District Angling Association; and
- Roy Fullerton - Lough Neagh Rivers Trust Member and Secretary of the Kells, Conor and Glenwherry Angling Club.

The Committee heard the Bill lacks clear definitions and does not outline the impact of existing legislation such as the Water Order and Habitat Regulations which will therefore weaken the ability of the Bill to make significant, future proofed changes.

The Committee heard that the Bill does not address the changes needed to deal with the current challenges our waterways are facing.

The Committee heard of a need for the Bill to address and enhance regulatory and enforcement powers to address water pollution; provide stronger action and penalties for repeat offenders; and the removal of the penalty cap to bring Northern Ireland in line with UK legislation.

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

- The need for the Bill to provide tools to support the recovery of Lough Neagh;
- The need for stronger enforcement methods and the scrapping of the cap on penalties;
- The Departments response to requests for environmental investigations;
- Concerns regarding engagement with the Department during the co design process of the Bill;
- Concerns at how the Bill will manage the relationship between the Fisheries Act; the Water Order and Habitat Regulations; and
- The economic benefits for Northern Ireland derived from having clean waterways and sustainable fish stocks.

The Chair thanked the Lough Neagh Rivers Trust representatives for their attendance.

The Lough Neagh Rivers Trust representatives left the meeting at 11:44am

The Committee considered correspondence from NILGA in response to an invitation to provide oral evidence on the Bill stating that it has identified limited direct considerations for local government and therefore do not believe that an oral evidence session would add significantly to the Committee's consideration of the Bill.

The Committee noted NILGA stated that it will provide a short written submission setting out the local government perspective and highlighting the broader interests of councils in relation to environmental quality, partnership working and place-based outcomes.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

5. Any Other Business

None

6. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Thursday 17 September at 10:00am in Room 21, Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned 11:45am

Signature:

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated