



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

17 September 2026

Meeting location: Room 21 Parliament Buildings

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

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:06am

1. Apologies

None

John Blair apologised that he would need to leave the meeting at 11:45, returning later in the meeting, to undertake Speaker's duties as the Speaker is out of the country on official business.

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 to an item in Matters Arising relating to Cleggan Quarry in County Fermanagh having written, in early July, on behalf of a constituent to the Mid Ulster District Council Planning Department on the matter and also to Agenda Item 12 due to having a farming background.

Declan McAleer MLA declared an interest in the Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill and to Agenda item 12 as 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 as the Bill Sponsor.

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

3. Chairperson's Business

The Chairperson referred to correspondence received from the Countryside Alliance Ireland (CAI) regarding a Pre-Action Letter in connection with the Hunting with Dogs Bill.

The Committee noted that last week John Blair stated that the legal matters referred to in correspondence from CAI are not related to the contents and purpose of the Bill but to positions he held before he became an MLA.

The Committee noted the Countryside Alliance responded by referring to the contents of a Pre-Action letter issued by Carson McDowell LLP, dated 8 June 2026, which mentions the legal case in the context of the ongoing Bill.

John Blair MLA commented on the correspondence and referred to what he stated to be inaccuracies contained in the letter.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Chairperson referred to an invitation from Concerned Residents Groups Ardtanagh, Shanrod & Fedney for her to attend a Hunt Resolution Meeting on Thursday 24th Sept to hear how the farming and rural community feel about hunting.

The Chairperson stated she was unavailable to attend the meeting.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

4. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 10 September 2026.

5. Matters Arising

The Committee considered a response, dated 9 September, from the Department regarding the Sustainable Farming Investment Scheme – Slurry Separation.

The Committee noted on 10 August it considered a written briefing on the launch of Round 1 of the Sustainable Farming Investment Scheme and sought clarification on the rationale for excluding mechanical separation equipment, including mobile anaerobic digestion (AD) units, from the list of eligible items under the Scheme.

The Committee noted the response states that the scheme offers support for off the shelf investments requiring little assessment at application stage, which is not the case for slurry separation equipment, where end of pipe solutions are still in development.

The Committee also noted that Officials will keep slurry separation equipment under review for future rounds of the scheme.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee returned to an item of AOB from its meeting on 10 September 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.

The Committee considered correspondence which refers to the circularity in the responses from Fermanagh and Omagh District Council and DfI in relation to the historic permissions relevant not only to the planning application but also to the wider question of environmental monitoring and regulatory oversight of quarry operations.

The Committee also noted that in connection to environmental regulation, the role of Shared Environmental Services (SES) was also raised.

The Committee then re-considered a response from SES from its meeting on 19 March, stating its core function is to undertake Habitat Regulations Assessments on planning applications and local development plans on behalf of all eleven local councils and that the Regulations do not extend to the protection of public health.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Departmental Officials joined the meeting at 10:13am

6. Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill – Departmental Oral Evidence session

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following Officials briefed the Committee:

- Richard Johnston, Director of Agriculture Policy Division; and
- Emma McCarter, Head of Branch – Farm Sustainability and Development Policy Branch.

The Committee was briefed on main issues the Department has identified with the Bill and heard that the Bill as introduced would require amendment to ensure it is not defective and can be enacted if passed.

The Committee heard the Bill does not specifically name the prices index that the Department must adhere to when setting annual payment rates and that the eligibility

criteria or the land that would qualify as an ANC is not clearly defined. There are also no requirements for the payment to be linked to delivery of environmental outcomes. Also, the obligation on DAERA to introduce a scheme within 12 months presents challenges.

Officials also stated that an ANC scheme will create additional funding pressures as provision for payments are not included in the Minister of Finance's Draft Budget 2026-29/30.

The Committee also heard that support for farmers in SDAs are already available through the Sustainable Agriculture Programme (SAP) and there is limited evidence that an ANC Scheme will deliver value for money.

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

- Affordability of the scheme within the existing earmarked budget;
- Rationale for the Department's view that the Bill lacks positive environmental outcomes linked to the proposed scheme;
- Concerns that the Bill will create a hierarchy of support in favour of ANC payments;
- Concerns that existing resources within the Department will have to be transferred to enable the deliverability of the scheme; and
- Concerns the scheme could potentially benefit larger farms and disadvantage smaller farms.

The Chair thanked the Officials for their attendance.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to write to the Department to enquire if it has conducted any recent exercises to update the land designated for Severely Disadvantaged Areas (SDAs) since the establishment of the previous scheme in the 1970s.

Daniel McCrossan MLA joined the meeting at 10:40am

The Departmental Officials left the meeting at 10:55am

The NoISE Coalition representatives joined the meeting at 10:58am

Áine Murphy MLA joined the meeting at 11:03am

7. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Oral Evidence session with NoISE Coalition

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Mr Steven McGonigal – Chairman;
- Dr Cathal Cassidy - Founder Chairman;
- Dr Aoife Byrne – Member; and
- Dr Nick Fox OBE - Member

The Committee heard that the NoISE does not support the Bill as in its view it will not improve overall animal welfare and cannot justify criminal prohibition, enforcement powers and penalties affecting established rural, farming, conservation, and land-management activities.

The Committee heard the Bill is not based on objective scientific evidence but on emotive presentation and organisational campaigning and that no amendments to the Bill would resolve the issues.

The Committee also heard that it believes that the two-dog limit is not better for animal welfare and that the Bill has potential consequences for livestock protection, crop protection, disease control, and biodiversity management.

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

- The consultation response including the lack of demographic data;
- The rationale and effectiveness of using two dogs rather than a Pack;
- The use of alternatives methods of controlling the fox population;
- Difficulties arising regarding the definitions of intent;
- Welfare concerns regarding the shooting of foxes without the use of dogs;
- Comparisons with other jurisdictions in the UK and Republic of Ireland;
- Challenges posed in areas where activities may stray across the Border; and
- Unintended consequences the ban would have for animal welfare and pest control methods.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

John Blair MLA left the meeting at 11:44am

The NoISE Coalition representatives left the meeting at 12:00pm

The meeting was suspended at 12:00pm

The meeting resumed at 12:11pm

USPCA representatives joined the meeting at 12:11pm

Declan McAleer MLA rejoined the meeting at 12:23pm

Daniel McCrossan left the meeting at 1:05pm

8. Hunting with Dogs Bill – Oral Evidence session with the USPCA

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Ms Heather Weir – CEO; and
- Ms Siobhan McHaffie - Director of Animal Operations and Service Development.

The Committee heard that the USPCA supports the Bill and that wild animals should be protected from unnecessary suffering.

The Committee also heard that the USPCA supports the prohibition of trail hunting and the use terrier dogs to hunt underground due to concerns that dogs involved can be exposed to injury, disease, and neglect.

The Committee heard that exemptions should be tightly drawn, necessary, and proportionate but that dogs should not be permitted to attack or kill wildlife under any exemption.

The Committee heard that there should be a DAERA led cross-departmental and multi-sectoral central animal welfare hub and that any enforcement of the legislation should be properly resourced.

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

- Public confidence in the Department's oversight and enforcement of the legislation;
- Unintended consequences of the Bill and practicalities of enforcement if animals cross the border;

- The unintended consequences of the two dog limit on animal welfare;
- Concerns that alternative methods to hunting with dogs such as trapping or shooting can lead to increased suffering for the animal;
- USPCA engagement with the farming community on the impact of the Bill on farmers;
- The negative impact on farmers due to damage caused to land by recreational hunting; and
- The need for clear definitions and statutory guidance to give protection for ordinary dog walkers involved in an unplanned incident.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance and advised that the Bill sponsor John Blair MLA was not present at the briefing as he had to attend to other duties in his role as Deputy Speaker.

The USPCA representatives left the meeting at 1:08pm

9. SL1 - The Climate Change (Carbon Budget 2038-2042) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026 - NOTING STAGE

The Committee noted that the purpose of the SR, which is subject to the draft affirmative procedure, is to set the level of Northern Ireland's Fourth Carbon Budget covering the period 2038-2042 under powers conferred on it by section 23 of the Climate Change Act (Northern Ireland) 2022.

The Committee noted that Officials are scheduled to brief the Committee on the SR on 15 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 15 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.

10. SR 2026/134 The Agriculture (Student Fees) (Amendment) Regs (NI) 2026

The Committee noted on 12 May the Department submitted the SL1 and the draft SR to notify its intention to make this SR to amend The Agriculture (Student Fees) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2023 by applying an inflationary increase to the current Higher Education student fees at CAFRE. It also sets the 2026/27 academic year as the final year that the 2022 legacy fee framework will operate and for student fee purposes, better defines, with new wording, international students.

The Committee noted on 21 May it agreed to issue a Call for Views which received no responses and on 18 June it received an oral briefing and agreed that the Department proceeds to make the SR subject to the ESR report. The Committee noted the 72nd ESR report has not drawn the SR to the attention of the Assembly.

The Committee noted that the Department has advised that there have been no changes to policy content since the SL1 was submitted to the Committee and that the SR has been laid before the Assembly under the negative resolution procedure and came into operation on 1 September.

Agreed: The Committee agreed it had no objection to the SR.

11. Departmental Written Briefing - The Sea Fishing (Amendment) Regulations 2026 – Pollack.

The Committee considered the written briefing providing an overview of DEFRA's proposal for a UK-wide Statutory Instrument (SI) using powers under the Fisheries Act 2020, covering soft shelled crab and recreational fishing for pollack. Recreational fishing for pollack will apply only to Northern Ireland and sets a daily catch limit of three in order to protect the limited stock of pollack and support its recovery. Once this limit is reached, anglers may continue to fish on a catch and release basis.

The Committee noted that DAERA Officials have engaged with Northern Ireland stakeholders to advise them and that the SI is expected to be laid in Westminster before the end of 2026.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the briefing and to request that the Department provide the Committee with details of the feedback it received during its engagement with NI stakeholders.

12. Departmental Written Briefing - The Agricultural Schemes (Data Publication) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2026

The Committee noted following UK exit from the EU, DAERA is still legally required to publish payment data details of recipients of Farm Support Payments over a threshold of €1,250. The Committee also noted the current DEFRA hosted website where the data is published and made accessible will cease to operate from 31 May 2027.

The Department is required to make legislative changes to enable publication of data to continue from that date. The Committee noted the proposed SR expected to be presented to the Committee in November will change the name of the website where DAERA's beneficiary payment data is intended to be published; and change the currency from Euros to UK Sterling.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note the briefing.

13. End of Session Report 2025-2026

Agreed: The Committee agreed that due to time constraints it would return to consider and agree the report at the meeting on 24 September.

14. Correspondence

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

A memo dated 10 September, from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding Revised DoF & DoJ Section 59/Section 7 Authorisation letters.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 11 September from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding 2025-26 Public Expenditure Outturn and Forecast Outturn providing the June and July positions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

A memo dated 11 September from the Clerk to the Committee for Finance regarding costs associated with the application of provisions of Bills.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The 72nd Report of the Examiner of Statutory Rules referring to SR. 2026/135: The Agriculture (Student Fees) (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.

- Detergents and Surfactants; and
- Plants Obtained by NGT and Their Products

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence dated 14 September from the Climate Change Committee with its report titled: Advice to UK Government on Proposed Heathrow Airport Expansion.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Correspondence dated 9 September from Eco Balance Ltd outlining a proposal for publicly funded pilot programme to test a product designed to reduce septic-tank pollution and carbon emissions.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

An invitation from the Causeway Coast Dog Rescue (CCDR) to its Annual Animal Welfare Conference on Tuesday 6 October in the Long Gallery including a request to brief the Committee on some current issues

Agreed: The Committee agreed to add the CCDR to the list of potential briefings.

Notification from the NI Human Rights Commission regarding the launch of the Frontier Workers Case Studies Booklet Launch on Wednesday 7 October at Riddell Hall, Stranmillis Road, Belfast.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

Two items of correspondence the Committee has been copied into from an individual dated 9 September to DAERA / NIEA regarding a formal complaint concerning the asbestos disposal cell at Lisbane Landfill.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

15. Forward Work Programme

The Committee considered the draft Forward Work Programme.

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

16. Any Other Business

None

17. Date and Time of Next Meeting

The next meeting will be held on Tuesday 22 September at 10:00am in Room 30 Parliament Buildings.

The meeting was adjourned 1:15pm

Signature:

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated