



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Committee

Minutes of Proceedings

06 October 2026

Meeting location: Room 30, Parliament Buildings

Present: Diana Armstrong (Chairperson)
John Blair MLA
Michelle McIlveen MLA
Gareth Wilson MLA

Via Zoom Aoife Finnegan MLA until 10:40am, then in person
Áine Murphy MLA

The meeting opened in Public Session at 10:29am

1. Apologies

Declan McAleer MLA (Deputy Chairperson)
Tom Buchanan MLA
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.

None were declared.

3. Minutes

Agreed: The Committee agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 29 September 2026.

The NI Fish Producers Organisation (NIFPO); Anglo Northern Ireland Fish Producers Organisation (ANIFPO); and Northern Ireland Fishermen's Federation (NIFF) representatives joined the meeting at 10:30am

4. Fisheries, Aquaculture and Water Environment Bill Oral Evidence Session - NI Fish Producers Organisation (NIFPO); Anglo Northern Ireland Fish Producers Organisation (ANIFPO); and Northern Ireland Fishermen's Federation (NIFF)

This item was recorded by Hansard

The following representatives briefed the Committee:

- Dr Lynn Gilmore - CEO, NIFPO;
- Mr Brian Chambers- CEO, ANIFPO and
- Mr Adam Holland - Fisheries Sustainability Officer, NIFF

The Committee heard that the industry is struggling with issues including access to Isle of Man waters; rising fuel costs; recruitment and retention of staff due to a lack of a bespoke visa, given the reliance on foreign labour; and spatial squeeze, alongside emerging challenges such as wind farm proposals.

The Committee heard that although there is recognition for the need to modernise fisheries law, strengthen water-environment protections, and create a new regulatory framework there are concerns that the Bill in its current form will not be fit for purpose.

In relation to penalties and enforcement, the Committee heard a call for further clarification and guidance regarding how certain provisions of the Bill will be implemented within the Northern Ireland zone, and in respect of other enforcement provisions in existing legislation.

The Committee also heard that the maximum fines proposed appear excessive and the penalty system should be scaled and proportionate reflecting both the severity of the offence and the financial realities facing the Northern Ireland fishing industry where profits are low.

The Committee also heard the Bill should address potential conflicts with existing legal obligations, including the Landing Obligation.

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

- Concerns regarding the proposed increase in maximum penalties given the significant economic challenges facing the Northern Ireland fishing fleet;
- A need for a scaled and proportionate system of fines to create a deterrence for repeat offenders;
- Concerns about phrases such as “Power to use reasonable force” in the Bill, alongside the increase in enforcement powers, in light of what some in the industry consider to be the current disproportionate actions of the Border Force;
- The need for the Bill to distinguish better regarding how it differentiates between inland fisheries and sea fisheries;
- The level of engagement with the Department during the consultation process;
- Further clarity needed regarding Landing Obligations in the Bill;
- Support needed for the fishing industry due to the competitive disadvantage arising from the lack of government support in comparison to the Republic of Ireland;
- The impact of a weakened fishing industry on food security;
- The need for a Fisheries Resilience Framework to support the future of the fishing industry with greater co-operation between government departments; and

- The potential benefit that could be derived if income from fines were to go into a dedicated fund to address environmental damage and support innovation, rather than into the Consolidated Fund.

The Chair thanked the representatives for their attendance.

Gareth Wilson MLA joined the meeting at 11:03am

Gareth Wilson MLA left the meeting at 11:05am

The NIFPO, ANIFPB and NIFF representatives left the meeting at 11:07am

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department, dated 1 October, regarding steps being taken to resolve an anomaly within Clause 15 of the FAWE Bill that have been identified by RalSe.

The Committee noted the issue relates to the proposed new Section 11 of the Bill regarding Aquaculture Licences in its reference to Section 26 at Subsection 11(3)(b).

The Committee noted Departmental officials have raised the matter with The Office of Legislative Council and the Assembly Bill Office has now confirmed that it is a small cross referencing error that will be amended by way of a printing correction.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence from the Department for the Economy dated 5 October.

The Committee noted following its evidence session with FASTA on 29 September it agreed to write to that Department to enquire about the measures in place to monitor potential gas leakages from offshore green and renewable energy infrastructure.

The Committee noted the response states that there are no offshore renewable energy installations in Northern Ireland waters but that the environmental impact associated with potential gas leaks are a matter for the Northern Ireland Environmental Agency (NIEA).

Agreed: The Committee agreed to note.

The Committee considered correspondence from Cahir Linn Oysters Ltd - a marine aquaculture and commercial fishing company that cultivates and harvests oysters in Carlingford Lough.

The Committee noted that Cahir Linn Oysters Ltd stated it has followed the Committee oral evidence sessions and that in relation to the Bill's proposals for further enforcement powers, including financial penalties, it holds evidence which it believes could assist Committee scrutiny of how existing enforcement powers are used in practice.

Agreed: The Committee agreed to receive the information in confidence as requested.

The Chairperson advised that due to Members having to attend other Assembly business the meeting could not continue as there was now no quorum. She apologised to the RalSe Officials and that their session would be rescheduled.

The meeting was adjourned 11:10am

Signature:

Diana Armstrong MLA, Chairperson

Dated