

Committee for the Environment End of Session Report

1 September 2014 – 31 August 2015

Membership and Powers

The Committee for the Environment is a Statutory Departmental Committee established in accordance with paragraphs 8 and 9 of the Belfast Agreement, section 29 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and under Standing Order 48.

The Committee has power to:

- Consider and advise on Departmental budgets and annual plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- Consider relevant secondary legislation and take the Committee stage of primary legislation;
- Call for persons and papers;
- Initiate inquiries and make reports; and
- Consider and advise on any matters brought to the Committee by the Minister of the Environment

The Committee has 11 members including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson and a quorum of 5. The membership of the Committee during this reporting period has been as follows:

Ms Anna Lo MBE (Chairperson)
Mrs Pam Cameron (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Colum Eastwood
Mr Alban Maginness
Mr Ian McCrea
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Gary Middleton¹
Mr Ian Milne
Lord Morrow
Mrs Sandra Overend

¹ With effect from 18 May 2015, Mr Gary Middleton replaced Mr Peter Weir

Overview

During the Assembly session 2014-2015, the Committee for the Environment scrutinized a wide range of issues. This included the completion of the Committee Stage of the Road Traffic Amendment Bill, the commencement of the Committee Stage of the Environmental Better Regulation Bill, and the conclusion of the Committee's inquiry into Wind Energy.

In the course of this work the Committee engaged with a wide range of stakeholders, both within and outside Parliament Buildings.

During this session, the Committee met 32 times. The majority of the meetings were held in public session. While the Committee has indicated a preference for meeting in public, there are occasions when it must meet in closed session, most notably to discuss Committee reports. The Committee also met informally on a number of occasions to hear briefings and discuss a wide range of issues with stakeholders. This included meeting with the environment NGO sector and Queens University of Belfast to discuss the impact that proposed budget cuts would have on projects aimed at protecting and preserving the environment.

The Committee commissioned a broad range of research papers from the Assembly Research and Information Service (RaISE) to assist in its work. This included papers on wind farms and EU issues. RaISE also carried out primary research on behalf of the Committee to ascertain the views of young people on planned changes to driving licensing laws.



Committee Chairperson addressing the 2015 NILGA Conference

Primary Legislation

The Committee completed its scrutiny stage of the Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill and reported to the Assembly in March 2015. The Committee was broadly supportive of the Bill, but expressed concern regarding two provisions: the retention of the "statutory option", i.e. the right to ask for a blood or urine specimen to replace a breath test if that breath test is marginally over the present prescribed limits; and the introduction of a 12 month minimum learning period for learner drivers, commencing at the earlier age of sixteen and a half. The Committee successfully sought changes

to the Bill, as the Department agreed to amend the Bill to reflect the concerns of the Committee. These amendments were agreed by the Assembly on 29th June 2015.

The Environmental Better Regulation Bill was introduced to the Assembly on 22nd June, and Committee Stage commenced on 1st July. Thirteen responses were received as part of the Committee's call for evidence. The Committee will continue its scrutiny of this Bill in the 15/16 session.

Subordinate Legislation

The Committee scrutinised 86 statutory rules in this period.

2014/15 saw huge reforms in our local government structure following the transfer of planning functions to 11 new councils. As a result, the Committee scrutinised statutory rules to facilitate this transfer, ensuring appropriate checks and balances were in place.

The Committee was also instrumental in securing amendments to the Department proposals for taxi reforms. The Northern Ireland Assembly endorsed the Committee's recommendation to pray against the Taxi Licensing Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 and the Taxi Operators Licensing (Amendment) Regulations, to create the balance between more flexibility for consumers while not being disadvantageous to some sectors of the industry.

Inquiries

The Northern Ireland Assembly endorsed the Committee's inquiry report into wind energy in March 2015. The Committee made 20 recommendations, regarding a strategic approach to planning; planning processes; wind turbine and noise separation distances; and community engagement. The Department has agreed to consider these recommendations further as part of a review of renewable energy policy and guidance.

EU Scrutiny

The Committee has kept itself informed of issues arising from the European Commission through regular briefings from the Department, the Assembly's EU Co-ordinator and Assembly Research and the representatives from the Barroso Task Force. The Committee agreed its own priorities arising from the European Commission's Work programme; and has scrutinized Statutory Rules that transpose or implement EU Directives. It has also held the Department to account where possible infraction fines have been notified to the Committee.



Committee visit to Ballymacormick Point Area of Special Scientific Interest, Groomsport.

Budget Scrutiny

Following the publication of the final DOE budget, the Committee called the Minister to attend Committee to account for reductions in funding to the eNGO sector and how this was notified to the sector. As a result, the Minister found additional money to allocate to the sector and, at the Committee's request, entered into a consultation exercise with environment groups to ascertain how best this money might be spent. This led to an announcement in May of a £1.25m new Natural Environment Fund.

The Committee also scrutinized the budget proposals put forward by the Department during the October, January and June monitoring rounds, and made recommendations for reallocations based on Department and Committee priorities.

Policy Scrutiny

The Committee has received briefings (written and oral) on many departmental consultations; and has scrutinised and advised the Minister on policy issues in relation to the draft Single Planning Policy Statement, Marine Conservation Zones, Planning processes for mining and related exploratory work for minerals and gold.

Engagement

Engagement was an important area of the Committee's work during 2014/15.

Committee members participated in a study visit to Belgium and Germany in October 2014, to examine the extraction and recycling of waste. This was an area that the Committee spent much focus during the 14/15 session, as it developed its understanding by visiting local waste management companies and scrutinizing legislation regarding food regulations and waste management.



Members of the Committee visit the Metabolan waste recycling site in Germany

The Committee held a meeting at the South Eastern Regional College (SERC) on its Newtownards Campus, followed by a tour of its Environmental Skills Centre.

The Committee held informal meetings at the Environment marquee at the Balmoral Show. Members met with many environment groups and learnt more about their work. Specifically, Members discussed the sectors concerns regarding the EU's proposals to review the Birds and Habitats Directives as part of the overall regulatory reform programme (REFIT), specifically that any review might reduce the environmental protections provided to birds and habitats. Members also discussed proposals for a land strategy.



Committee members attending a meeting in the Environment Marquee at the Balmoral Show

As part of preparations and evidence gathering for the inaugural Northern Ireland Environment Week, the Committee visited the Scottish Environment Week. It is expected that Northern Ireland Environment Week will take place in September 2015.

At the NILGA annual conference, Members of the Committee participated in a panel discussion on emerging issues following the transfer of planning functions to the new 11 councils.

Key priorities for 2015 – 2016

Following an informal discussion on 10th September 2015, the Committee agreed that its key priorities for the 15/16 session include:

- Scrutiny of the Environmental Better Regulation Bill;
- Post legislative scrutiny;
- Budget issues;
- Policy issues including transfer of planning functions, single planning policy statement and waste management;
- Implementation of Committee recommendations in Wind Energy inquiry;
- Restructuring of Departments; and
- Northern Ireland Environment Week.

ANNEX A

Committee for the Environment – Expenditure for the period

Budget area	Details	Expenditure
Committee travel – Committee members and staff travel and subsistence in relation to visits and meetings outside Parliament Buildings	Includes the costs of external meetings at the Lough Neagh Discovery Centre and South Eastern Regional College; also visits to Dublin, Edinburgh and waste recycling and research facilities in North West Europe & Swords,	£ 5, 831.46
Printing of Committee reports	Reports – both hardcopy and electronic on the Road Traffic (Amendment) Bill (NIA 35/11-15) & the Committee Inquiry into Wind Energy	£3,192.09
Advertising – the cost of public notices relating to Committee inquiries, the Committee stage of bills and meetings held outside Parliament Buildings	Public notices calling for evidence on the Environmental Better Regulation Bill	£637.87
Specialist Advice	Use of a Specialist Acoustician during the Committee's Inquiry into Wind Energy	£1000.00
General expenses	Committee meeting refreshments, room hire, stakeholder engagement events and hospitality	£2,037.31
Total		£12, 698.73