The 2022 to 2027 Mandate - Committees

The Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs



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Membership as at 1 October 2026 Chair – Ms Diana Armstrong MLA (UUP), Deputy Chair - Mr Declan McAleer MLA (SF), Miss Aine Murphy MLA (SF), Ms Aoife Finnegan MLA (SF), Miss Michelle McIlveen MLA (DUP), Mr Tom Buchanan MLA (DUP), Mr Gareth Wilson MLA (DUP). Mr John Blair MLA (All), Mr Daniel McCrossan (SDLP) – not in the picture.

Top issues in the current mandate

1. **Bovine TB (BTB)**

The bill for compensation to farmers in relation to cases of BTB is over £60m annually and could go up to £70m. BTB is a big stress for farming families and there is disagreement about how to best deal with the problem.

In April 2025, The TB Partnership Steering Group's (TBPSG) **Blueprint for Bovine TB Eradication in Northern Ireland** was published. The TBPSG includes representatives from the farming, veterinary, environmental, wildlife, animal processing, and market sector groups.

The Blueprint outlines actions to be taken over the short, medium, and longer term, based on three pillars – people, cattle, and wildlife. It creates a number of pilot schemes, including testing cattle through a regional approach, extending the testing window (testing over a longer period), and a focus on herds with prolonged and recurring breakdowns. While it does not commit to any precise form of wildlife intervention, such as a badger cull, it will "bring forward proposals for effective, evidence-based wildlife interventions and TBPSG views for consideration by Minister". DAERA has more recently held a public consultation on Potential Wildlife Intervention options as part of the BTB in Northern Ireland: Blueprint for Eradication. The consultation closed in early October. Legislation will then be required to allow any preferred approach to be implemented.

2. **Water quality in general and Lough Neagh in particular (blue-green algae)**

NAP – Nutrient Action Programme – In November 2025, the AERA Committee held its own stakeholder event to gather views on the Minister's proposed NAP for 2026-29, which aims to

optimise the use of nutrients, such as nitrogen and phosphorus, in agriculture, to prevent pollution of water and the wider environment. The Committee is aware that excess nutrients, particularly phosphorus, are a major cause of water quality issues, such as those seen in Lough Neagh.

Reducing excess nutrients is a key objective of the NAP. The plan also helps farmers to comply with regulations linked to government payments for farmers. The Committee held a NAP event to bring both farming and environmental groups together for the first time to discuss the issue. The consultation findings were sent to the Department's stakeholder working group on the matter.

This has been a contentious issue, with DUP accusing the Minister of blaming farmers for the problem. The party opposes the NAP, saying that it is a threat to the Agri-food industry. There were 3,400 responses to a consultation on the matter. A DUP motion against the programme was passed in June 2025. The programme is currently under review.

Following the outworkings of its first public consultation, DAERA established a Task and Finish Group to produce a report for the Minister setting out proposals to improve water quality for inclusion in the NAP 2026-2029. The Group considered all consultation responses to date, and any other potential alternative solutions or information raised within the Group, which are supported by evidence and will meet the legal obligations to improve water quality.

The proposals set out in the Group's report in June 2026 were submitted to the DAERA Minister and were considered before the formulation of further proposals. The latest public consultation on the proposed Nutrients Action Programme (NAP) 2027–2030 closed on 7 September 2026.

The Committee keeps a watchful eye on the Minister's **Lough Neagh Action Plan**, holding evidence sessions with departmental officials. The Lough Neagh Report and Action Plan is built around four key pillars: education, incentivisation, regulation, and enforcement. Some of the Minister's interventions are already complete, including initiatives around livestock slurry management and nutrient pollution control, but many others, such as investment in wastewater infrastructure and septic tank management, are still in progress. The Committee recognises that the road ahead is long, and for some issues, such as sediment build-up, recovery could take decades.

In terms of general water quality, the Committee held a **joint concurrent meeting with the Infrastructure Committee** on 21st April to take evidence from NI Water.

3. Farming

There is a raft of new farming payments being introduced in relation to protecting the environment ('farming with nature'), and a new penalty regime for breaching rules in this area. The Minister's **Sustainable Agriculture Programme (SAP)** aims to transition Northern Ireland's farming sector towards environmental sustainability, economic resilience, and improved productivity, while supporting food security and biodiversity. SAP includes a variety of schemes and packages designed to incentivise sustainable practices, including:

- Beef Sustainability Package – includes the Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme and the Suckler Cow Scheme which encourage farmers to reduce cattle slaughter ages, calving intervals (time between births for an animal) and first calving age to lower carbon footprints and improve efficiency.
- Soil Nutrient and Health Scheme – to optimise soil management and nutrient use

- Farming with Nature Package - rewards farmers for environmental improvements
- Knowledge and Innovation schemes – support adoption of sustainable practices through advisory services and research
- Livestock Dietary Emissions Challenge Fund – encourages innovation in reducing emissions from livestock.

Legislation:

Primary - Executive Bills

The Agriculture Bill introduced an aid scheme for fruit and vegetable growers, to replace the EU legacy scheme which ended in December 2025. The Committee stage of the Bill took place between December 2024 and May 2025. While the Committee had a few concerns about the Bill, including the fact that it was an 'enabling bill' – granting powers to the Minister to make secondary legislation - it accepted assurances from the Minister regarding those concerns and, in the end, after consultation and consideration of the Bill at 13 Committee meetings, the Committee did not propose any amendments to the Bill. The Bill was passed by the Assembly and is now the Agriculture Act.

The **Dilapidation Bill** – is a bill to grant powers to Councils to deal with dilapidated and dangerous buildings in urban and rural areas. The Committee made recommendations for a series of amendments to the Minister, and he accepted these and took them forward as Ministerial amendments, so the Committee did not then need to take forward its own amendments. Having completed its Committee Stage on 15 May 2026 the Bill progressed through its remaining stages in Plenary and final stage was completed on 8 September 2026. The Bill now awaits Royal Assent.

The **Fisheries and Water Quality Bill**. The Committee is currently taking oral evidence on the Bill at additional meetings on Tuesday mornings and will enter its deliberations (to agree its position on each part of the Bill) in November 2026. The main purpose of the Bill is to update current fisheries legislation to modernise and implement Northern Ireland's fisheries policies to ensure that commercial and recreational fishing is undertaken at sustainable levels so it can benefit future generations. The Bill supports a whole-system approach to managing the water environment, recognising that healthy fish populations and productive fisheries depend on clean, well-functioning eco-systems.

The Committee has noticed that Executive Bills are containing more enabling powers, meaning that a Bill does not specify detailed rules of the law but delegates powers to the Minister to develop the specifics later through secondary (delegated) legislation (Statutory Instruments or Statutory Rules).

Primary - Member's Bills

The Areas with Natural Constraints (Payments) Bill. This Bill is sponsored by Declan McAleer MLA. It passed second stage on 23 March 2026 and entered Committee Stage. It seeks to reinstate support payments to hill farmers and those farming in other difficult areas. It was the first Member's Bill to be introduced in the Assembly in this mandate. The Committee completed taking its oral evidence and moved to deliberations in October 2026.

The Hunting with Dogs Bill. The Bill is sponsored by John Blair MLA. It passed second stage on 26 May 2026 and is now at Committee Stage. It aims to ban hunting wild mammals with dogs in

Northern Ireland, including trail hunting and terrier work, while setting out specific exemptions. The Committee is in the middle of taking oral evidence on this contentious Bill and will likely move to deliberations by November/December.

Delegated (Secondary) Legislation

In recent years, the Assembly has strengthened its scrutiny of delegated legislation.

To date, the Committee has considered a number of pieces of delegated legislation ('regulations') tabled by the Minister under the **Affirmative Resolution** procedure (must be approved by an Assembly vote) on the matters of: Use of Closed-Circuit Television in Slaughterhouses; establishment of a Just Transition Commission (in relation to the Climate Change Act 2022); and Sheep Carcase Classification and Price Reporting. The Committee scrutinises the regulations and reports to the Assembly.

Prayers of Annulment (**Negative Resolution** procedure) – will automatically become law on a certain date unless the Assembly objects)

> **Hops Certification Regulations** (Oct 2024) were brought to the Assembly by the Minister in order to align NI with EU rules on the certification of imported Hops – required by the Windsor Framework. In the Committee, some members questioned the need for such regulations, given there are no hop producers in Northern Ireland. The DUP opposes all regulations which make the law in NI different from the law in the rest of the UK. When the Committee voted on the matter, there were only 5 out of 9 members present, which is the quorum (minimum number of Members who have to be present for a vote to be taken). There were 3 in support of annulling the regulations and 2 against). In the Chamber, members of the Committee who had not been present for the Committee vote, spoke against the motion to annul. Following the debate, 29 voted Aye and 44 voted No, so the regulations were not annulled and became law.
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> There was also disagreement within the Committee about the **Animals (Identification, Records, Movement and Enforcement) Regulations** (Feb 2025). This time the prayer of annulment was put down not by the Committee but a member of the Committee - Michelle McIlveen (DUP), opposed by Declan McAleer (SF), Deputy Chair of the Committee. These regulations related to animal health and livestock traceability. Again, the DUP objected to the application of EU rules in Northern Ireland (as a result of the Windsor Framework), arguing that it undermines the UK's internal market. Following the debate in the Chamber, 34 voted to annul the regulations and 47 voted against, meaning that the regulations went into effect.
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> **Shellfish Gathering Regulations** (Feb 2026) A motion was tabled by the Committee, but a debate and vote did not take place because the Department revoked the regulations before the debate, so no annulment was necessary. (The Minister recognised that the vote would not go his way.) A new SR is now before the Committee to ban shellfish gathering in a closed season (set period of time) but only in Strangford Lough.

Legislative Consent Motions

The UK Parliament will not normally legislate on devolved (transferred) matters without first obtaining the consent of the Northern Ireland Assembly. Consent is given through a Legislative Consent Motion (from the relevant Minister) which is debated in the Assembly Chamber (Standing Order 42A). Committees consider these motions and report to the Assembly.

Pet Abduction Bill – a Private Member's Bill which would create a specific offence for the abduction of cats and dogs, to recognise that animals are not mere property, but sentient beings. The crimes would carry a maximum prison sentence of five years. It would also provide powers to extend the legislation to cover other pets if necessary. The UK Government supports the Bill. The Committee considered the issue and agreed to support the Minister's Legislative Consent Motion and to recommend that the Assembly approve it.

Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Bill - The Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction (BBNJ) Bill was introduced to the House of Commons on 10 September 2025. The Bill facilitates the UK's implementation of the international BBNJ Agreement under United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), covering marine genetic resources, area-based management tools, and environmental impact assessments in areas beyond national jurisdiction. At its meeting on 11 December 2025, the Committee agreed to support the Minister in seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the Legislative Consent Motion.

Subsequently a Second Legislative Consent Memorandum – Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Bill (Lords Amendments Of 12 January 2026) came to the Committee. This Memorandum included a draft Legislative Consent Motion relating to amendments made to the BBNJ Bill at House of Lords Report Stage on 12 January 2026, which inserted additional provisions engaging devolved matters. The Committee agreed to support the Minister in seeking the Assembly's endorsement of the Legislative Consent Motion.

Fact-Finding Visits/Stakeholder events

In this mandate, the Committee has gone on a number of external visits to: Tyrone and Fermanagh to hear about local environmental issues; the Agri-food and Biosciences Institute, Hillsborough; Belfast's Window on Wildlife; Mount Stewart; Kilkeel Harbour to learn about challenges in the fishing industry; College of Agriculture, Farming and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) Hill Farm, Antrim, a 'nature farm' in Carrickfergus and Clandeboye Estate Farm; and Loughrey College. The Committee holds a meeting at the annual Balmoral Show, where the Assembly has a stand for the duration of the show. The Committee has held two stakeholder events – one on NAP and more recently in June 2026 on Anaerobic Digestion.

Challenges – a lot of the issues which the Committee has been dealing with are long-standing problems which are not easily resolved, such as BTB and Lough Neagh. On the issue of Lough Neagh, the DUP has accused the Minister of blaming farmers for the problem. DUP members on the Committee will continue to oppose what they see as the undemocratic imposition of EU rules on Northern Ireland, creating a divergence between NI and the rest of the UK post Brexit.

Committee members do tend to align with the views of their party. The position of the DUP in relation to the Windsor Framework means that DUP members of the Committee will generally oppose the application of EU laws in Northern Ireland. Alliance members of the Committee will back their Minister, Andrew Muir.

The Committee's relationship with the Minister is generally good. However, the Committee's Prayers of Annulment demonstrate that the Committee is willing to *not* support the Minister when the Committee's evidence demonstrates issues with what the Minister is proposing.

October 2026