

COMMITTEE FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT

END OF SESSION REPORT 2014-2015

Remit and Powers

The Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development is a Statutory Departmental Committee established in accordance with paragraphs 8 and 9 of Strand One of the Belfast Agreement, under Section 29 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and under Assembly Standing Order 48. The Committee has a scrutiny, policy development and consultation role in respect of the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development and has a role in the initiation of legislation.

The Committee has power:

- to consider and advise on Departmental budgets and annual plans in the context of the overall budget allocation;
- to approve relevant secondary legislation and take the Committee Stage of relevant primary legislation;
- to call for persons and papers;
- to initiate inquiries and make reports; and
- to consider and advise on matters brought to the Committee by the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development.

Membership

The Committee has 11 members, including a Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson, and a quorum of five members. The membership of the Committee is as follows:

Mr William Irwin¹² (Chairperson)
Mr Joe Byrne³ (Deputy Chairperson)

Mr Thomas Buchanan
Mrs Jo-Anne Dobson
Mr Declan McAleer^{1,4}
Mr Oliver McMullan
Mr Robin Swann^{5,6,11,16}

Mr Kieran McCarthy^{9,10,13}
Mr Edwin Poots¹⁴
Mr Sydney Anderson^{8,15}
Mr Ian Milne^{2,7}

¹ With effect from 23 January 2012 Ms Michaela Boyle replaced Mr Conor Murphy

² With effect from 08 May 2012 Mr Chris Hazzard replaced Mr Willie Clarke

³ With effect from 19 May 2012 Mr Joe Byrne replaced Mrs Dolores Kelly as Deputy Chairperson

⁴ With effect from 10 September 2012 Mr Declan McAleer replaced Ms Michaela Boyle

⁵ With effect from 03 December 2012 Mr Danny Kinahan replaced Mr Robin Swann

⁶ With effect from 21 January 2013 Mr Robin Swann replaced Mr Danny Kinahan

⁷ With effect from 15 April 2013 Mr Ian Milne replaced Mr Chris Hazzard

⁸ With effect from 16 September 2013 Miss Michelle McIlveen replaced Mr Trevor Clarke

⁹ With effect from 01 October 2013 Trevor Lunn replaced Mr Kieran McCarthy

¹⁰ With effect from 27 January 2014 Mrs Judith Cochrane replaced Mr Trevor Lunn

¹¹ With effect from 04 July 2014 Mr Tom Elliott replaced Mr Robin Swann

¹² With effect from 23 September 2014 Mr William Irwin replaced Mr Paul Frew as Chairperson

¹³ With effect from 29 September 2014 Mr Kieran McCarthy replaced Mrs Judith Cochrane

¹⁴ With effect from 06 October 2014 Mr Edwin Poots was appointed to the Committee

¹⁵ With effect from 06 October 2014 Mr Sydney Anderson replaced Miss Michelle McIlveen

¹⁶ With effect from 30 June 2015 Mr Robin Swann replaced Mr Tom Elliott

KEY ACTIVITIES, OUTPUTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

1. This report covers the work of the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development during the 2014-15 session of 2nd September 2014 to 4th July 2015.

PRIMARY LEGISLATION

The Reservoirs Bill

2. The Committee reported on the Reservoirs Bill on 1st July 2014. One area which was not addressed to the satisfaction of the Committee was the issue of Frequency of visits by Supervising Engineer. As a result the Committee voted not content with the relevant clauses within the Bill, namely clause 25 and clause 33.
3. Following discussions between the Committee and Departmental officials on 11th November 2014, further amendments as requested by the Committee were drafted, considered, and approved by the Committee at its meeting of 10th February 2015.
4. At this meeting the Committee also agreed that its decision should be reflected in an addendum to the Committee Report on the Reservoirs.

[Addendum to the Committee Report on the Reservoirs Bill](#)

5. As a result of the work of the Committee the Minister tabled 208 amendments at consideration stage. These addressed the concerns of the Committee and were debated at Consideration Stage on 28th April 2015, all 208 of the Ministers tabled amendments were agreed by the Assembly. There were a further 6 amendments tabled by Members of the Assembly, of which 1 was agreed, 1 was negated on division and the other 4 were not called.

SUBORDINATE LEGISLATION

6. The Committee considered and scrutinised 23 Policy Proposals (SL1s) from the Department of which 17 were approved as Statutory Rules. The secondary legislation considered dealt with a wide range of topics from animal and plant health, organic farming, fishing and policies for payment of European funding schemes. While most of the legislation was uncontroversial, proposals relating to agricultural support payments and cross-compliance conditions were the subject of extended discussion by the Committee.
7. **SR 2014/291 The Common Agricultural Policy Direct Payments and Support Schemes (Cross Compliance) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2014 and subsequent amendment** - at the meeting of the 11th November 2014 the Committee considered

the above piece of legislation. A number of issues were raised including irrigation issues, minimum soil cover, hedge cutting and hedgerow tree removal and bovine animals missing ear tags.

8. After further discussion at the meeting of 18th November the Committee indicated it was still unhappy with the merits of the policy implications. Acknowledging that any further delay to the legislation could have an adverse effect on the delivery of payments to farmers, the Committee reluctantly agreed this policy on the understanding that the issues raised would be addressed in 2015.
9. Subsequently there were ongoing discussions with DARD officials which led to the following changes;
 - A derogation to permit hedge, tree or scrub cutting, trimming or laying between 15 and 31 August to facilitate farmers wishing to plant oilseed rape or reseed grasses or other herbaceous forage;
 - Removal of the requirement that residues of crops harvested after 1 November are not disturbed until just before sowing the following spring and provision to add flexibility to the measures that farmers can put in place to limit soil erosion where soil or weather conditions prevent a crop from being sown following harvest;
 - Change of the timescale under which a derogation is granted to permit ploughing matches to between harvest and 15 January, the removal of the requirement for the ploughing match to be organised by the Northern Ireland Ploughing Association or anybody affiliated to it; &
 - Technical amendments relating to the definition of two of the specialist control bodies, the correction of the omission of a word in relation to the provision relating to powers of entry, and the inclusion of the botanical names of all plants classified as invasive species.
10. These proposals were brought to the Committee at its meeting of 16th June 2015 and the Committee agreed that it was content that the outstanding issues had been satisfactorily addressed and approved the Statutory Rule. The Department laid this Rule during August 2015 and It will be considered by the Committee once the new session has started.

Cattle Tag Issues

11. Throughout the session the Committee considered the impact of changes to the Cattle ID regulations with specific reference to the acceptable tag loss thresholds which were put in place in January 2014.
12. Following criticism from the Committee regarding DARD taking a “harder” approach than that taken in neighbouring jurisdictions, and the lack of consultation before changing the regulations, officials informed the Committee of a possible easement, i.e. a reduction in percentage penalty. The easement involved reducing the seriousness score that animals found with one missing ear tag attract and in doing so would, in many cases, reduce the level of penalty applied for animals found with one missing ear tag.

13. The Committee, following consultation with the industry, agreed that it was still not content that the easement went far enough. The Committee is still working with the Department to find an acceptable resolution to the issue.

ASSEMBLY CONSENT MOTIONS

14. The Committee considered one Assembly Consent Motion - The Public Bodies (Abolition of the Advisory Committee on Pesticides) Order 2014. The Committee considered papers on the proposal to abolish the Advisory Committee on Pesticides and the draft consent motion as laid in the Business Office. The Committee subsequently agreed that it was content for the Department to proceed in seeking the Assembly's consent to the Public Bodies (Abolition of the Advisory Committee on Pesticides) Order 2015. The motion was debated in the Assembly on 17 February 2015:

[Legislative Consent Memorandum on the Public Bodies Abolition of the Advisory Committee on Pesticides Order 2014](#)

INQUIRIES

15. The Committee undertook a Review into Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion with the aim of exploring the success, or otherwise, of the projects that comprise the Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Programme. The Review focused on the implementation of the interim reviews recommendations with the aim of advising the Minister on the development of a successor programme.
16. The Committee considered evidence gathered from multiple sources, including RaISe, stakeholders, the Department, NISRA, and experts in the area of deprivation such as Mr Trutz Haase. The review culminated in a large stakeholder event, hosted by the Committee, in the CAFRE Greenmount Campus on 20th November 2015.
17. The Committee outlined its key issues and recommendations in a position paper to the Minister. This paper was also debated in Plenary on the 2nd March 2015. A formal written response to the paper was received on 28th May 2015 during a special meeting held at the offices of the RCN in Cookstown.
18. However, the Committee indicated it was not satisfied with the Departmental written response to their position paper. On 2nd June 2015, the Committee wrote to the Minister to express concern at the perceived lack of urgency and co-ordination in addressing the recommendations of the Review.

[Committee Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Review](#)

[Official Report of the Committee Position Paper Debate](#)

[DARD Response to the Committee Position Paper](#)

BUDGET SCRUTINY

19. The Committee examined departmental budgets on six occasions during the 2014-15 session.
20. The Committee noted and approved the Departmental bids in the October 2014, January 2015 and June 2015 Monitoring Rounds. The Monitoring Round bids included increased compensation for Bovine TB, AFBI estate and assets running costs, CAFRE building improvements, ICT reform for CAP, and for the 2007-14 RDP.
21. The Committee also considered the DARD plan for operating to a reduced budget. It received a copy of the DARD Consultation Document on the Draft Budget 2015-16: Spending and Saving Proposals on Friday 21st November 2014. The Committee took evidence from DARD officials and drafted a response to the Committee for Finance and Personnel which included concerns the Committee had expressed about minimising the impact on frontline services to farmers, managing the impact of reducing staff by 300 posts, concerns on the proposed NI Food Animal Information System costs and actual need, issues of the costs of the DARD Relocation Programme, effective inspection regime, rising administration costs, and DARDs ability to raise additional revenue.

[Official Report of the Committee DARD Budget Evidence Session](#)

22. At its meeting of 17th February 2015 the Committee heard from AFBI on its Strategic Plan and Estate Strategy. The Committee agreed that the budget cuts being imposed on AFBI were more severe than those imposed within the rest of DARD and other public sector bodies. Members noted that this would result in AFBI having to prioritise its statutory obligations above all other functions, potentially at the cost of its R & D activities. The Committee agreed that these cuts, coupled with the loss of so many staff over a short period of time, will inevitably lead to the loss of expertise and skills with a potential impact on its ability to successfully bid for external R & D contracts.
23. The Committee requested that the Minister provide justification for the severity of the cuts to the AFBI budget and urged her to reconsider what could be done to minimise these cuts.

POLICY SCRUTINY

24. During the 2014 - 15 session, the Committee undertook ongoing policy scrutiny of areas such as progress on CAP Reform, the DARD Business Plan, the proposed DARD Relocation programme and PfG targets.
25. NI RDP - throughout the session the Committee has constantly questioned and monitored progress on the new Rural Development Programme. This included consideration of the Farm Business Improvement Scheme. Members have questioned the timescales of the programme, what work can be undertaken early in preparation, and urged investigation into whether schemes could be launched prior to approval from the EU. Detailed consideration was also given to the budget for the NIRDP and how that budget would be allocated.

26. New Basic Payment System (BPS) - the Committee received briefings from DARD on the new basic payment scheme and raised questions on the definition of an active farmer, especially in respect of establishing entitlements. The Committee also raised issues around young farmer and the greening requirements as well as the timescales for the issue of SAF and Inspections.
27. The Committee noted the importance of the payment to the farming community and noted that this was a transition year to a new payment scheme. Never the less the Committee indicated that it expected DARD to ensure that its payment timetable at least met, if not exceeded, that of 2014.
28. EU Food Labelling - the Committee considered the impact of the new EU Food Labelling Laws. Currently many lambs raised in Northern Ireland go for processing in the Republic of Ireland. The new labelling laws, which focus on naming the Member State where the lamb was reared and slaughtered, created difficulties.
29. The Committee raised these with the DARD Minister, Minister Coveney in the Republic of Ireland, the Chairperson of the respective Committee in the Republic of Ireland, the EU Commissioner and the Defra Secretary of State. All responded to the Committee stating their willingness to find a solution to the issue with the possibility of labelling the product as Irish from both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.
30. Dairy Industry - In response to major concerns regarding pricing in the Dairy Industry, the Committee held an extraordinary meeting on 30th July 2015. The Committee heard from the Dairy Industry, from the UFU, from DARD Minister and from four Dairy Farmers on the major issue affecting the industry. The Committee agreed an immediate programme of actions.
31. On the 27th August, the Chairperson, representing the Committee, attended and spoke at an Ulster Farmers' Union Dairy Conference to discuss the current crisis within the industry. Following this the Chairperson, in coalition with the Minister, the NI MEPs and Industry representatives took the plight of the NI Dairy Industry to Brussels to seek solutions with the EU Commissioner Phil Hogan.

ENGAGEMENT

Events

32. ***Anti-Poverty & Social Inclusion Event, CAFRE Greenmount, 14th January 2014*** - The Committee organised this event as part of its Review into Rural Poverty and Social Inclusion in order to engage with a large number of stakeholders interested in these issues. Over 30 attendees participated in the discussion which informed the Committee's position paper which was presented to the Minister. The details of this event and review can be found at the link below.

[Official Report of Anti-Poverty Stakeholder Event](#)



Additional Meetings

33. The Committee held a number of Informal meetings, including a meeting with EU Commissioner Hogan in March 2015 and a meeting with the TB Strategic Partnership Group.



34. The main issues the Committee discussed with the Commissioner were volatility in Agri-Food, on-going issues with pig production, beef production issues with labelling. The Committee also discussed the EU Commission response to the NI Rural Development Programme, issues with red tape, young farmers and mid-term review.

Concurrent Meetings

35. The Agri-Food Strategy Board (AFSB) was formally established by the Ministers for ARD and ETI in May 2012, in order to meet the Executive's Programme for Government commitment to develop a strategy for the agri-food sector. The AFSB formally launched their strategic action plan, "Going for Growth" in May 2013.
36. Both the ARD and ETI Committees, respectively, received separate briefing on the progress of the action plan in October 2014. At that stage given the considerable overlap of remit on this issue the two Committees agreed that the next time the Committees were due an update that it would be sensible to seek a joint briefing. The Committees therefore held a Concurrent Meeting on Tuesday 9th June 2015 where they were briefed by the Chairperson on the Agri-Food Strategy Board, and the Senior Responsible Officers from both DARD & DETI.
37. Following the meeting each Committee requested a detailed report of the progress made against each of the recommendations that came out of the Going for Growth Report from its relevant Department.

Visits

38. **National Ploughing Championships, Ratheniska, Co. Laois, and the Grange Research Center, Co. Meath 23 - 24 September 2014** - The Committee visited the National Ploughing Championships in Ratheniska, Republic of Ireland meeting with many of the businesses from Northern Ireland exhibiting at the event. The Committee also visited the Teagasc Grange Research Center to investigate its Better Beef Research Programme.



39. **Northern Ireland Ploughing Championships, Balmoral Park, 17 October 2014** - In support of the local Ploughing Championships, the Committee attended the annual competition at Balmoral Park.



- 40. Visit to Scotland, 22 - 23 October 2014** - The Committee visited Scotland and met with the NFU and Quality Meat Scotland to discuss issues in the beef market and their marketing schemes. They also met with Professor Bishop at Roslin University to discuss TB and Genomics, and visited a local farm to see the implementation of a business improvement scheme.



- 41. Balmoral Show, Balmoral Park, Lisburn, Thursday, 14 May 2015** - The Committee attended the DARD breakfast at the Balmoral Show and met with industry representatives along with the Minister and senior officials from the Department.

- 42. Rural Community Network (RCN), Thursday 28 May 2015** - The Committee attended a breakfast event organised by the RCN where Members were able to discuss issues with local groups. The Committee also held a formal meeting on its Review of Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion.





43. **AFBI Loughgall, Loughgall, Thursday 25 June 2015** - Members attended AFBI at Loughgall for an update on the research and development work being undertaken in support of the local agri-food sector. The Committee were given a tour of the Mushroom, Top Fruit, Potatoes, Forage Grass Breeding and Biomass Energy Crop research programmes. The Committee also discussed details of the beef and sheep research programmes.



44. **The Priorities for the Next Session are :**

- The implementation of the new Common Agricultural Policy, including the Rural Development Programme 2014 - 2020, and Basic Payment Scheme
- Inquiry into Better Regulation;
- The Dairy Industry Crisis.

Committee Expenditure

45. Details of Committee expenditure for the session are contained at Appendix A.

Contact Details

46. Anyone wishing to contact the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development should do so at the following addresses:

The Clerk to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development
Room 244
Parliament Buildings
Stormont
Belfast
BT4 3XX
Email: committee.agriculture@niassembly.gov.uk

COMMITTEE FOR AGRICULTURE AND RURAL DEVELOPMENT
Committee Expenditure for Parliamentary Session 2014 - 2015

Budget area	Details	Expenditure
Committee Travel - committee members and staff travel and subsistence in relation to visits and meetings outside Parliament Buildings	<p>Includes the cost of committee visits to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Ploughing Championships, Ratheniska Co. Louth - To meet with local businesses represented at the Championships and DARDs event to publicise NI produce; • Northern Ireland Ploughing Championships - Visiting the local ploughing Championships at Balmoral Park to support the industry; • Visit to Scotland - Explore both policy and practical programmes for the farming industry in Scotland; • Balmoral Show - To attend the Annual Industry breakfast; • Rural Community Network - Attending a stakeholder breakfast event and hold an Committee meeting; & • AFBI Loughgall - A tour of the facilities and research programmes at the AFBI Loughgall facility curriculum to the next generation of farmers. 	£4,964.90
Advertising	Better Regulation Inquiry	£510.31
General expenses	Cost of refreshments for committee meetings, working lunches, seminars, room hire and witness expenses	£1,371.29
Total		£6,846.50