

## Northern Ireland Assembly News – May 2020

*51 MLAs have signed our Charter to Protect and Restore Nature – [see here for more information](#)*

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## Executive Committee Business

### Budget 2020-21 (5 May)

The Minister of Finance sought and gained approval for the programme of expenditure proposals for 2020-21 as set out in the Budget laid before the Assembly on 31 March 2020 and the further detailed information laid on 30 April 2020. During the [debate](#), the Chair of the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs welcomed the £293 million secured for DAERA for 2020-21, but highlighted concerns about what will replace the funding of the basic payment, and what form it will take in future years. A further £6.3 million has been set aside under capital for the Environmental Farming Scheme (EFS) and rural tourism, and £9.7 million for the farm business improvement schemes. The EFS funding would allow for the roll-out of the next tranche of that programme, which brings environmental benefits to farms. The AERA Committee considered the EFS previously and noted that the rates of subsidies should be reviewed in order to maximise environmental sustainability, and are economically sustainable for, and attractive to, farmers. The Committee welcomed the £2.2 million allocated to deliver the new climate change legislation, as well as a scoping study for the independent environmental protection agency and the light detection and ranging (LiDAR) study. In connection with the independent environmental protection agency, the Committee drew attention to the Environment Bill currently making its way through Westminster and highlighted the Committee's concerns over the proposed Office of Environmental Protection including lack of clarity on its role and how it will interact with the NIEA here.

### The Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles (Construction and Use) Regulations (NI) 2020 (12 May)

The Minister for Infrastructure sought and gained agreement that *That the Electrically Assisted Pedal Cycles (Construction and Use) Regulations (NI) 2020 be affirmed*. The regulation removed electrically assisted pedal cycles (EAPCs) in NI from the regulatory process and bring us into line with the Republic of Ireland and Britain, as well as many other countries in Europe. We are currently the only region within these islands that requires this type of electric bike to be registered, licensed and insured as a motor vehicle. The main objectives of the regulations are to simplify and reduce the legislative burden on those who wish to ride an e-bike, to promote cycling as a mode of transport that has health and environmental benefits and to reduce congestion in our cities and towns. Read the full debate [here](#).

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## Answers to Written Questions

### Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs

#### Fines for litter and fly-tipping (14 May)

The Minister was asked whether he can use emergency measures to increase fines for litter and fly-tipping. He [replied](#) that he was 'not minded at this stage' to take measures which would increase fines for littering and fly-tipping. He stated his belief that the current fixed penalty amounts, which can be issued to offenders in respect of such actions, are set at an appropriate level. He added that when pursued through the courts, significant fines can be imposed on persons convicted of offences relating to littering and fly-tipping but, of course, the level of fines in specific cases is a matter for the judiciary.

#### Agri-tourism, the Economy and COVID-19 Recovery (18 May)

The Minister [stated](#) that his officials are currently working to develop a new Rural Policy Framework for Northern Ireland. This work has indicated the need for farm diversification, including potential agri-tourism activities, to generate new income sources which will contribute to both sustainability of family farms and to the wider rural economy. He intends to go out to consultation on the new Rural Policy Framework later this year but officials will also consider, from the work undertaken to date, what actions could contribute to post Covid 19 planning.

### **Protection of Food Standards (27 May)**

The Minister [stated](#) that he has made it clear at the Inter-Ministerial Group EFRA, that high standards must be maintained, and that UK producers must not face unrestricted competition from third country competitors who might benefit from greater levels of direct and indirect support or significantly lower regulatory costs. He added that it is essential that the UK maintains its position as a safe and reputable source of food and that he will continue to impress upon the UK Government the need to protect the integrity of the UK's food industry.

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## **Minister for the Economy**

### **Tourism Recovery Steering Group (18 May)**

The Minister for the Economy [outlined](#) the proposed make-up and meeting schedule for the Tourism Recovery Steering Group. She established a Tourism Recovery Steering Group (TRSG) on 23 April to lead the planning and preparations for the recovery of the Northern Ireland Tourism Industry in response to COVID-19 and prepare for regrowth of the sector. The inaugural meeting was scheduled for Friday 15th May, followed by a further meeting on Friday 19th June and monthly as required. The Minister chairs the TRSG and the membership comprises representation from relevant Government Departments, Tourism NI, Tourism Ireland, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, VisitBritain and the tourism and hospitality representative bodies – NI Tourism Alliance, Hospitality Ulster and NI Hotels Federation. The Steering Group will report progress on a regular basis to the Executive and the Economy Committee through the Minister.

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## **Minister for Finance**

### **Dormant Accounts Fund Update (11 May)**

To Minister of Finance provided an [update](#) on Dormant Accounts. The Dormant Accounts Fund now totals £20.5 million. The Fund will be used to support third sector organisations as they emerge from the COVID-19 crisis in line with the themes of resilience, capacity and sustainability as originally identified. In September 2019, the Department of Finance, directed the National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF), to establish a Dormant Accounts Scheme. The NLCF has consulted with Stakeholders to inform a Strategic Plan which will set out how this money is used effectively by social economy and the community and voluntary sector. Alongside its work as part of the COVID-19 response, the Lottery is continuing to develop its Strategic Plan, which will be laid by his Department in the Assembly in due course, with the Fund open to applications thereafter.

## **Minister for Infrastructure**

### **Planning and Climate Change (12 May)**

The Minister stated that there is an urgent need to reduce emissions in order to tackle the climate emergency and reach at least the UK net zero target by 2050. She [outlined](#) some of her initiatives including: steps to minimise additional private car travel and to maximise the use of active travel and public transport; using available resources to green our infrastructure and deliver sustainable transport that connects communities; availing of the opportunities that arise through collaboration within and beyond government to reduce the length of journeys and hence the need for motorised travel; identification of actions to support the decarbonisation of transport and infrastructure services that will help to reduce carbon emissions and ultimately enhance citizens' lives and our communities as well as our economy and environment; creation of a walking and cycling Champion within her Department to ensure that we increase the percentage of journeys made by walking and cycling. In taking planning decisions, the Minister stated that wants to ensure that the overall objective of the planning system in furthering sustainable development is met. One of the key aims of the Regional Development Strategy 2035 is to reduce our carbon footprint and facilitate mitigation and adaptation to climate change whilst improving air quality. Similarly, the Strategic Planning Policy Statement for NI indicates that the planning system should help to mitigate and adapt to climate change by shaping new and existing developments in ways that reduce greenhouse gas emissions and by promoting sustainable patterns of development while working with natural environmental processes.

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