

**Minutes of the Meeting**  
**Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Board**  
**held via WebEx**  
**on Thursday 25 February 2021 at 1000hrs**

**Present via conference call**

**Board Members**

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair

Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Vice Chair

Ms Kate Burns

Dr Michelle Costello-Smith

Ms Theresa Cullen

Mrs Fiona Hanna

Dr Richard Horton

Ms Joan Houston

Mr Richard Solomon

Mrs Sharon Smyth

**AFBI Board Apprentice**

Ms Morag Abernethy

**AFBI Executive**

Mrs Josephine Kelly, (Acting) CEO & Director of Finance and Corporate Affairs Division

Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division

Dr Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division

Mr Pieter-Jan Schön, Director of Environment and Marine Sciences Division

**In attendance (via conference call)**

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance

Mr Dermot Tierney, Queen's University Belfast (Item 8.2)

Mr Adam Ervine, Queen's University Belfast (Item 8.2)

Ms Jacqueline Armstrong, AFBI Solicitor - IP and Commercial Contracts (Item 8.2)

Mr Conor O'Neill (Item 8.1, 8.2) AFBI Finance

Mr Charlie Thompson, AFBI Secretariat

Mrs Stephanie Robinson, AFBI Secretariat

Mrs Lisa Donnelly, AFBI Secretariat

**1. Welcome and Introduction**

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

## 2. Apologies

**ACTION**

Apologies were received from Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer and Mrs Hannah Francis, Head of Finance (Item 8). It was noted Mr Solomon would be late in joining the meeting.

## 3. Conflict of Interests/Register of Interests Declaration

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

## 4. Draft Minutes of the AFBI Board Meeting held on 28 January 2021

The minutes were accepted as a fair and accurate reflection of the AFBI Board meeting held on 28 January 2021.

The Board made reference to Decision Time uploads and requested that if a document was deleted and replaced, there could be an indication of what changes were made on the revised paper. It was agreed that Secretariat would review this.

**Sec**

### 4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 28 January 2021

The Board noted the progress against actions as per the action sheet.

## 5. Divisional Updates: on BREXIT & COVID-19

### **BREXIT**

Dr Douglas presented an update titled "*BREXIT – Update for Board as at 22 February 2021*", highlighting in particular two key issues:-

- The trial seed importation issue raised in the January update report has now been resolved with DAERA content for a physical inspection of the variety seed lots rather than a full phytosanitary inspection. Seed deliveries are now being arranged.

*Mr Solomon joined the meeting*

- Laboratory accreditation – On 26 January 2021 AFBI and DAERA were informed by DEFRA of a further change to the wording of the EU Commission decision. It now states that AFBI can continue to use United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) for testing of product for GB market

but must use another EU accreditation body for testing of product to other EU member states as well as for Northern Ireland compliance with the Official Controls Regulation (OCR) to which we are still bound through the NI Protocol.

- In response, a high level meeting took place in the last week between DAERA, Food Standards Agency NI, DEFRA and Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) at which it was agreed to escalate the accreditation issue to the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee. DAERA have undertaken to produce a paper, with AFBI input to inform the UK Chief Veterinary Officers (CVOs) of options for AFBI accreditation.

Dr Douglas noted a number of options were discussed:

- Retaining status and continuing with UKAS.
- Move wholesale to Irish National Accreditation Board (INAB).
- Invoke trans-boundaries that UKAS & INAB sign up, so they can inspect and require approval.
- Hold two accreditations with UKAS & INAB that AFBI will continue to accredit testing through UKAS until such time as a way forward is agreed at UK level.

The Board expressed concern around governance and the commercial aspects. They recognised that AFBI have now met with DAERA senior management on a number of occasions to take these options forward, however clarity is still required.

The Board noted the work of AFBI staff and that the internal BREXIT Working Group was meeting regularly. An update was requested for the next Board meeting.

**AD**

## **COVID-19**

Dr Douglas reported that discussions were ongoing with Department of Health through COVID consortium regarding the anticipated maximum level of testing required under the Service Level Agreement. This position has been discussed with DAERA who were preparing a paper and recommendation to

the DAERA Minister. Dr Douglas expected a response from DAERA by mid-March. An update was requested for the next meeting. **AD**

The Board queried the cost implications to AFBI should testing continue past 1 April 2021 and how this would be funded. It was agreed that Dr Douglas would contact DAERA to seek a response as soon as possible. **AD**

The Chair stated he would be meeting with Mr Brian Doherty, DAERA on 10 March 2021 and he will also follow up on this. **CC**

### **BREAK (11-11:10am)**

## **6. Governance Issues**

### **6.1 Risk Management**

#### **6.1.1 Reports of new or emerging risks**

Mrs Kelly advised that the Executive was not aware of any new or emerging risks to the organisation. It was agreed that the "Brexit Risk" would be kept under review.

#### **6.1.2 Quarterly Risk Update – Corporate Risk Register**

The Board noted the "*Risk Management Update*". The Chair requested that the Executive consider the presentation format of the Corporate Risk Register to ensure that this reflects past trends and analysis associated with each risk. Mrs Kelly agreed to look at this with EMT. **JK**

#### **6.1.3 Code of Conduct for AFBI Board Members**

Mr Montgomery presented a paper on "*Code of Conduct for AFBI Board Members*". The Board welcomed the timely update in advance of the new members coming along and agreed to approve the revised policy.

#### **6.1.4 Updated Sub-Committees Terms of Reference**

There was discussion on the "*Sub-Committee Updated Terms of Reference February 2021*". These were to be reviewed in consultation with the Committee Chairs and brought back to a future Board Meeting. **GM**

## **6.2 Fraud**

### **6.2.1 Reports of new or ongoing cases**

Mrs Kelly advised that there were no reports of new or emerging cases of Fraud to be reported.

## **7.0 Health & Safety**

### **7.1 Health & Safety Update**

The Board noted the "*Health & Safety Update Report*". There was discussion on the reporting of near misses. The Chair suggested having webinar sessions for staff who were currently working from home before they would return to the office as a reminder of the process and procedures in place.

**JK**

The Board asked Mrs Kelly to pass their congratulations to Mr McGimpsey and the team on an excellent report.

*Mr Conor O'Neill joined the meeting.*

## **8. Finance & Business**

### **8.1 Finance Update Report**

Mr O'Neill presented the "*Finance Update Paper*", to the Board highlighting the following key messages:-

- On current information AFBI was currently forecasting a total DEL Budget underspend of £1.3m, the majority (approximately £ 0.9m) relating to two exceptional items; Royalty Income & Covid-19 testing. The remainder related to core AFBI activities.
- A key risk to AFBI delivering a balanced budget on its core activities this year is in the area of "Programme" spend. Currently a underspend on programme costs of £576K was forecast. Through the budget meetings the Divisions were encouraged to ensure that programme costs budgets were fully utilised and in line with contractual progress. Regular conversations were also taking place across the organisation to seek to optimise/transfer budget usage where opportunity arose.

- Mr O'Neill noted the £2.7m Capital budget position. The over-allocation has reduced from £65k to £12k. The Board sought reassurances that every effort was being made to ensure all items would be delivered by the end of the financial year.
- The Chair of the Finance and Business Strategy Committee highlighted the collaborative work that was done by the Executive for the Finance and Business Strategy Committee on 24 February 2021. The Committee were content with the assurances given by the Executive in relation to seeking to achieve a balanced 2020/21 budget.

*Mr Dermot Tierney, QUB, Mr Adam Ervine, QUB and Mrs Jacqueline Armstrong joined the meeting.*

## **8.2 Royalties Update Report**

Mr Tierney gave a presentation to the Board on the latest Royalties position. He outlined the process to date in relation to the Royalties dispute and progress made in relation to the legal process.

The Board thanked Mr Tierney and Mr Ervine for their comprehensive overview.

*Mr Tierney, Mr Ervine, Ms Armstrong and Mr O'Neill left the meeting.*

Mrs Kelly advised that there were still outstanding issues in relation to the draft QUB/AFBI IP management and Revenue Sharing Agreement which were being reviewed by the Oversight & Governance Committee. An update will be provided at the next Board meeting.

**JK**

The Board asked that all necessary approvals from DAERA that relate to the QUB/AFBI Business Case be put in place by the EMT as soon as possible.

**JK**

### **LUNCH (12.50 -1.25PM)**

## **9. Strategic Alliances**

### **9.1 QUB Alliance and CAFRE KPI's**

Dr Magowan delivered a presentation providing an update on the Strategic Alliances with QUB and CAFRE. This set out the KPIs and opportunities provided by these key Alliances.

The Executive recognised the need to dedicate adequate time to considering the organisation's future strategic direction in relation to wider Alliances.

The Chair stated he had a positive meeting with the (Acting) CEO of the Northern Ireland Environment Agency on 23 February 2021 and the feedback on AFBI was very positive.

## **10. Development of AFBI Business Plan 2021/22**

Mrs Kelly provided an update on the development of the AFBI Business Plan 2021-22. It was agreed that the draft Plan would be presented at the Board Meeting on 25 March 2021 and circulated for comment as soon as possible.

**JK/GM**

## **11. Executive Report**

The Board noted the "*Executive Report*" for February 2021. Discussions focused on a number of key issues.

Mr Schön gave a brief update on the Green Growth Strategy. He advised that DAERA have submitted a bid, on AFBI's behalf, for an investment of £7.75m in 2021/22 to purchase equipment to uplift capability and capacity to conduct novel research and capture data aligned with the "Green Growth Strategy". A response was expected by March.

Mrs Kelly advised that AFBI has re-introduced the use of the NICS Bonus Scheme. This was presented to the Organisational Development & Human Resources Committee in February.

Mrs Kelly referred to the high levels of staff turnover at present. HR were undertaking a more detailed analysis to gain a better understanding as to the reasons behind the high staff turnover. Recruitment plans were in place. It was also noted that induction had taken place for the new senior staff.

The Board thanked the Executive for a positive report.

## **12. Board Sub-Committees**

### **12.1 Minutes of Board Sub-Committees**

#### **12.1.1 Report of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 27 January 2021**

The Board noted the draft Minutes of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Meeting which was held on 27 January 2021. The Chair of the Committee highlighted the main topics of discussion at the Meeting.

**12.1.2** Report of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 16 February 2021

The main areas discussed at the OD&HR Committee were highlighted. Mrs Kelly updated the Board on the Business Case and Tender specification, which was in progress for Learning & Development Programme. Mrs Kelly referred to the number of senior managers who had recently started with AFBI. She also stated that coaching and mentoring is absolutely essential in growing and developing staff.

**12.1.3** Report of the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 18 February 2021

A single item agenda meeting has been arranged for the Science Strategy Committee on Thursday 18 March 2021 to explore the Science Strategy 2030 in further detail. This invitation will be extended to the full Board if any other Board member should wish to attend.

**12.1.4** Report of the Additional Finance & Business Strategy Meeting held on 24 February 2021

Dr Michelle Costello-Smith stated the next meeting would take place on 11 March 2021.

**13. Chair's Remarks**

The Chair has written to Minister Lyons welcoming him to his new position.

**14. Any Other Business**

The Chair requested that the Executive investigate the use of an alternative virtual meeting platform to ensure that guest presenters could not directly access the Board Meeting.

**Sec**

The Board requested an update on the latest correspondence with the inventors. Mrs Kelly advised that a letter to the inventors had been sent in December.



Mr Schön raised the possibility of having key messages for staff from each Board Meeting. Mrs Kelly advised that it was intended that Strategic Leadership Group (SLG) meetings will take place following Board meetings to provide an update on the key Board meeting messages.

**JK**

**15. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness**

The Board was content that the meeting had been effective.

There being no further business the meeting ended at 1515 hrs.

**16. Date of Next Meeting**

The next AFBI Board meeting is scheduled to take place on Thursday 25 March 2021 via Webex.