



Minutes of the Meeting
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Board
held via WebEx
on Thursday 29 April 2021 at 10.15hrs

Present (via conference call)

Board Members

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair	Mrs Fiona Hanna
Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Vice Chair	Dr Richard Horton
Ms Kate Burns	Ms Joan Houston
Dr Michelle Costello-Smith	Mr Richard Solomon
Ms Theresa Cullen	Mrs Sharon Smyth

AFBI Board Apprentice

Ms Morag Abernethy

AFBI Executive:

Mrs Josephine Kelly, Acting Chief Executive Officer
Dr Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division
Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Services Division
Mr Pieter-Jan Schön, Director of Environment and Marine Sciences Division
Mrs Hannah Francis, Acting Director of Finance & Human Resources

In Attendance (via conference call)

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance
Ms Margaret Anderson, Head of Corporate Affairs (Items 9 and 10)
Mr Connor McGimpsey, Head of Health, Safety & Dangerous Goods Compliance Branch (Item 10)
Mr Richard McCormick, Head of Corporate Communications (Item 11)
Mrs Tracey Teague, Acting Chief Executive Officer, Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) (Item 7)
Mr Kevin Hegarty, Director of Green Growth and Climate Action, DAERA (Item 7)
Ms Nikki Dornan, Staff Officer, AFBI Secretariat
Mrs Lisa Donnelly, AFBI Secretariat
Mrs Stephanie Robinson, AFBI Secretariat

1. Welcome and Introduction

ACTION

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Apologies were received from Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer. It was noted that Ms Cullen would be late in joining the meeting.

3. Conflict of Interests

None declared.

Mrs Kelly advised Members that DAERA had requested confirmation that the Board Members, Acting CEO and Directors had completed a Declaration of Interest form.

4. Draft Minutes of Previous Board Meeting held on 25 March 2021

The draft minutes from the Board meeting held on 25 March 2021 were accepted as an accurate and fair representation of the meeting.

4.1 Action Sheet from Previous Board Meeting held on 25 March 2021

The Board noted the progress against actions as per the Action Sheet.

Mrs Kelly advised it was intended that the Review of the AFBI Complaints Policy would be brought to the May Board Meeting.

Ms Kate Burns joined the meeting.

5. Executive Report Incorporating Brexit Update

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

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Covid -19 Testing

Dr Douglas reported that AFBI was advised by the DAERA Minister to stand down and pause testing on 31 March 2021 due to the reduction in testing numbers. However AFBI was ready to resume Covid - 19 testing, if required, should the volume of testing be increased again. AFBI has received a number of testimonials from senior officials from the Department of Health acknowledging the contribution made by AFBI staff. These had have been circulated to Board members in the Executive Report. It was noted that the Executive had in turn thanked all those involved within AFBI.

Brexit

Dr Douglas advised that AFBI staff are continuing to meet with DAERA to work through the requirements for testing under the Official Controls Regulations following EU exit and implementation of the NI Protocol. It was noted that high level meetings had taken place with DAERA and other UK Departments to discuss accreditation requirements. Dr Douglas advised that AFBI may be required to hold dual accreditation with both United Kingdom Accreditation Service (UKAS) and another EU member state accreditation body such as the Irish National Accreditation Board (INAB). He also outlined that the AFBI Quality Assurance Manager had undertaken a gap analysis between the two bodies to identify any policy differences.

Staffing

On discussing the staff attendance figures, the Board commended the Executive on the progress made with regards to the reduction of long term sickness.

There was discussion around the importance of recruitment, particularly with regards to a number of large projects. The Executive advised that they are continuing to review resources in order to facilitate efficient and effective recruitment including putting in place an external contract. The Board noted that HR would be providing a further update at the OD&HR meeting in May.

AFBI Science Strategy 2030

Dr Magowan advised that the implementation plan was being prepared and would be presented with a detailed timeline to the next Science Strategy Committee in June. Dr Magowan outlined that consultation continued with DAERA and a plan for stakeholder consultation was being discussed.

Partnership Working

The Chair advised that he, along with Executive colleagues, had attended a workshop with DAERA and representatives from each of its Arm's Length Bodies. He advised a meeting was also scheduled with the Executive to discuss AFBI's proposals to determine how to bring partnership working forward.

BREAK (11.20 – 11.30 AM)

6. Finance & Business

6.1 Finance Update Report

Mrs Francis presented the "*Finance Update Report*" to the Board highlighting the following key messages:-

The 2020/21 Provisional Outturn, as reported to DAERA, was within the 1% budget tolerance levels and had resulted in an overall underspend of approximately £250k. The Board commended all those involved and recognised the efforts across each Division in ensuring that the capital and resource position was within the agreed budget tolerances. The Board asked that they would be kept informed on any changes to the provisional outturn position. They noted the preparations for external audit.

Mrs Francis then updated the Board on the 2021/22 Budget position. She advised that AFBI had been advised of the budget on 13 April. She and her team had analysed the opening budget in depth and advised that, as it stands, at present, it would be a significant challenge for AFBI to meet its strategic objectives, including delivery of all of its scientific work programme and the advancement of scientific research.

Mrs Francis outlined that there are challenging budget constraints across the public sector, but in AFBI's particular situation, the 2021/22 opening budget was not flat line on the previous year, as was anticipated. This opening budget has meant that AFBI was starting in a deficit position, prior to taking account of additional needs arising from the current year planned activity to meet strategic priorities.

Following the allocation of opening budgets, DAERA immediately commissioned the first Budget Monitoring Round exercise on 14 April for submission of bids and easements by 23 April 2021. Mrs Francis outlined the concern around the impact of these identified pressures not being met through the allocation of additional funding. It was noted the June Monitoring Rounds submissions totalled £4.830m.

Mrs Francis noted further discussions will take place between AFBI Finance and DAERA and that the AERA Committee had written to AFBI seeking information the opening budget position.

Following Board discussion the Chair summarised their collective concerns at the opening budget shortfall position and reliance on the June Monitoring round bids. The Board agreed that the Chair would write to DAERA to articulate these concerns and to seek clarity as quickly as possible on the additional funding requested. **Chair /CEO**

Mrs Kelly highlighted that EMT will continue to liaise with DAERA Finance and DAERA Sponsor Branch.

7. Presentation by Tracey Teague and Kevin Hegarty, NIEA

Following a brief Introduction, Ms Teague, Acting Chief Executive, NIEA, gave a brief introductory overview of the '*Green Growth*' initiative.

Mr Hegarty provided the Board with a presentation highlighting the key stages in the development process and timelines for engagement. He outlined the important contribution AFBI could make in the "Data Modelling" stage. He advised that this would inform the Options Assessment whereby Policy options and actions could be informed by data modelling and co-design.

The Board thanked Ms Teague and Mr Hegarty for their presentation.

LUNCH 12.40 – 1.00 PM

8. Oversight and Governance of Soils and Green Growth

Mr Schön delivered a presentation to the Board on "*Oversight and Governance of Soil Health and Green Growth Programme*".

This provided the Board with an overview of the Objectives, Project Governance Structures, Scale and Resource Requirements. Mr Schön also set out the key identified Issues and Risks.

The Board welcomed the presentation. After discussion, it was agreed that this would be an important topic for the Board Away Day.

9. Governance Issues

9.1 Risk Management

9.1.1 Reports of New or Emerging Risks

Mr Montgomery advised the Board there were no new or emerging risks to the organisation.

9.1.2 Risk Management Update Report

Mr Montgomery presented a brief update paper on the "*Risk Management Update Report*". He advised that AFBI's Risk Review Group (RRG) met on 31 March 2021 to review and update AFBI's Corporate Risk Register (CRR). At the meeting the Group discussed current and emerging issues which impact AFBI's Risk Profile and updates to the actions in place to manage the risks. This was considered by EMT and ARAC in April prior to submission to the Board.

9.2 Fraud

9.2.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

Mr Montgomery advised the Board of one emerging Fraud case which was in the early stages of investigation and was linked to an ongoing whistleblowing case. Mr Montgomery noted that he would update the Board at the appropriate juncture.

9.3 Whistleblowing

9.3.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

In addition to the one case referred to in his update on Fraud, Mr Montgomery advised the Board of a further emerging Whistleblowing case which was in the early stages of investigation. Mr Montgomery noted that he would update the Board at the appropriate juncture.

9.4 Complaints

9.4.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

Mr Montgomery advised the Board there were no new corporate complaints, which had been notified.

In relation to an existing complaint, the Board was provided with an update that a response letter to the complainant, from the Acting CEO, had been prepared.

9.5 Accounting Officer Assurance Statement Q4 2020-21

The Board noted the Accounting Officer Assurance Statement for Quarter four 2020-21.

9.6 Review of Board Effectiveness 2020-21

Mr Montgomery presented a brief update paper on the *"Review of Board Effectiveness 2020-21"*.

He advised that as part of AFBI's Board Governance arrangements, the Board would undertake an annual self-assessment exercise to assess the performance of the Board. Overall, the results of the self-assessment exercise were positive, especially given the intensity of change within AFBI and the impact of the Covid 19 pandemic. The Board will gain further detail at the Board Away Day.

10. Health & Safety

10.1 Health & Safety Update

Mr McGimpsey presented a brief update paper on *"Health & Safety"*.

Mr McGimpsey highlighted that within AFBI there have been no clusters of Covid-19 cases identified to date with the number of positive cases and self-isolations remaining low.

In accordance with Chief Medical Officer guidance on easing of restrictions for clinically extremely vulnerable (CEV) workers, a CEV return to work protocol is being finalised for AFBI staff. This will enable the return of staff in this category who cannot work from home/extend redeployment. This will include a personal risk assessment and 'working during Covid' induction training, plus clear guidance on further control measures.

Mr McGimpsey updated the Board on Health and Safety statistics including (RIDDOR) incidents, accident rates and near miss rates.

There was discussion on the need for further risk assessments to be conducted for staff who continue to work from home. Mr McGimpsey agreed to follow up on this.

CMcG

The Board thanked Mr McGimpsey for his Report.

11. Corporate Communications Annual Report and Update on the Website Project

Mr McCormick delivered a presentation to the Board on "*Corporate Communications Annual Report*" and outlined the key progress in relation to the Corporate Communications and Stakeholder Engagement Strategy.

He outlined the activities and outputs delivered in relation to internal and external communications including 12 Webinars showcasing AFBI Science and the recent successful Outlook Conference which was attended by 400 delegates.

The Board thanked Mr McCormick and the Corporate Communications team for their excellent presentation and their hard work during the year.

12. AFBI Corporate Key Performance Indicators 2020-21 Outturn as at 31 March 2021

Mr Montgomery provided an update on the AFBI Corporate Key Performance Indicators 2020-21. He outlined that the paper set out the provisional outturn against the revised 22 Corporate KPIs, as at the end of Quarter 4, 31 March 2021. The Report was based on the commentary and returns provided by the Reporting Officers.

The Board noted that the outturn was positive with 19 of the 22 KPIs having been achieved. This was an improvement from the 2019/20 position. The Board discussed the actions in place to address those which were not achieved.

13. Draft AFBI Business Plan 2021-22

Mr Montgomery provided an update on the draft AFBI Business Plan for 2021/22. He outlined that it had been submitted to DAERA following consideration by the AFBI Board in March 2021. It was expected that this would be considered by the DAERA Departmental Board in April 2021.

Mr Montgomery advised that Divisional and Branch Plans were now being finalised for 2021-22 and the planning guidance had been updated to assist in this process.

14. Board Sub-Committees

14.1 Minutes of Board Sub-Committees

14.1.1 Report of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) held on 20 April 2021

The Chair of the Committee provided a summary of the key points raised at the ARAC meeting held on 20 April 2021.

15. Chair's Remarks

The Chair updated the Board on progress in relation to the recruitment process for new Board Members.

16. Any Other Business

Mrs Kelly advised that following discussion, AFBI Sponsor Branch had confirmed that Board members were eligible to undertake the training provided by the NI Civil Service Centre for Applied Learning (CAL).

17. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content that the meeting had been effective.

There being no further business the meeting ended at 15.15 hrs.

18. Date of next meeting

Tuesday 25 May 2021