



**Minutes of the Meeting
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Board
held via WebEx
on Thursday 25 March 2021 at 10.00hrs**

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 Chief Executive Officer
Dr Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division
Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Services Division

In Attendance (via conference call)

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance
Ms Margaret Anderson, Head of Corporate Affairs (Items 6 and 7)
Mrs Hannah Francis, Head of Finance (Item 8, 9 and 10)
Mr Conor O'Neill, Acting Head of Finance (Item 8)
Mrs Lisa Donnelly, AFBI Secretariat
Mrs Stephanie Robinson, AFBI Secretariat

1. Welcome and introduction

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer
Mr Pieter-Jan Schön, Director of Environment and Marine Sciences
Division.

3. Conflict of Interests/Register of Interests Declaration

None declared.

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

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

4.1 Action Sheet from previous Board Meeting held on 25 February 2021

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

5. Executive Report incorporating Brexit Update

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

Mrs Kelly referred to a recent letter received from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust expressing their gratitude to AFBI staff regarding Covid-19 Testing.

The Chair requested Dr Douglas to share the letter with AFBI colleagues involved in Covid-19 testing.

AD

Dr Douglas advised that it has been agreed for AFBI to stand down Covid-19 testing at the end of the current Service Level Agreement as at 31 March 2021. However, systems were in place that would allow

AFBI to recommence testing should testing be required in the coming months.

There was discussion regarding consumables relating to testing. It was agreed that AFBI would continue to hold some stock as a contingency measure and to return the remaining stock to the Health Service network with DAERA approval.

Mrs Kelly advised that a number of Internal Audit reports were due to be submitted to AFBI. These will be circulated to member of ARAC as soon as they are received by AFBI.

GM

The Board congratulated AFBI staff on the excellent AFBI Science Outlook Conference 2021 held on 24 March 2021.

The Board inquired about potential staff increases in the number of staff returning to the workplace as restrictions eased in the coming months. There was discussion about consideration of re-induction procedures.

The Board suggested organising a staff survey regarding staff returning to the workplace. EMT agreed to follow up on this.

JK

The Board also discussed the levels of agency workers and sought an update on recruitment. EMT also advised on current issues with the regard to the New Build Project at the VSD site. The Board asked to be kept updated. Discussions were also held on the Green Growth Project as well as the E&I Proposals. The Board sought assurance from EMT that these projects could be resourced and would not impact other projects.

Mrs Kelly updated on the Directed Research Fund (DRF) Policy. She advised that comments had been received back from Sponsor Branch on the Policy and that she was reviewing them. In addition she said that AFBI will be reviewing DRF figures in the three year Business Plan as part of the year end processing. She would bring the latest version of the Plan to the next Finance & Business Strategy Committee. The figures for 2020/21 would also be updated after the final financial outturn in June. It was noted that the DRF allocation had been raised from £1.5m to £2.5m by DAERA with the annual financial reviews and reporting requirements as set out in the Policy. This was welcomed

by the Board but asked for assurance that the DRF would be monitored and reported as agreed.

In response to a query from the Board on AFBI's Beef Research Facilities Dr Magowan advised that a paper had been submitted to DAERA for consideration.

The Board noted the re- introduction of the AFBI Staff Bonus Scheme and assured proper processes were in place.

Brexit

Dr Douglas provided the Board with an update on Brexit and reported the following key issues:-

It was noted that in relation to sample testing from new Border Control Points there had been no significant change since the last update to the Board and meetings are ongoing with DAERA.

In relation to the issue of accreditation, Dr Douglas advised that discussions were ongoing with DAERA. A gap analysis was being undertaken by AFBI's Quality Assurance Unit in relation to any additional requirements which could arise from the NI Protocol and EU Exit.

BREAK (11.10 – 11.20am)

6. Governance Issues

6.1 Review of Sub-Committees Terms of Reference

Mr Montgomery outlined that a desktop review of the Board Sub Committee Terms of Reference had been undertaken with a number of changes proposed to ensure that they were consistent and reflect actual practice.

Recent discussions at the Finance & Business Strategy and Oversight and Governance Committees have suggested a need to look more fundamentally at the roles and remit of each of the Committees to ensure clarity for all. It was agreed that Mr Montgomery would liaise with Committee Chairs on any required changes to the Committees scope of work.

6.2 Risk Management

6.2.1 Reports of New or Emerging Risks

Mr Montgomery advised the Board there are no new or emerging risks to the organisation but that any risks emerging would continue to be assessed.

6.3 Fraud/Whistleblowing

6.3.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

Mr Montgomery advised the Board of one emerging whistleblowing case which was in the early stages of investigation. Mr Montgomery advised that he would update the Board at the appropriate juncture.

6.4 Complaints

6.4.1 Reports of New or Emerging Complaints

Mr Montgomery advised the Board there were no new or emerging complaints.

In relation to an existing complaint, the Board were provided with an update that a corporate response had been issued to the complainant and no reply had been received.

6.4.2 Review of AFBI Complaints Policy

Ms Anderson presented a brief update paper on the "*Review of AFBI Complaints Policy*". She advised that she was undertaking a review of the current Policy and would aim to bring a revised Policy to EMT and the Board in April.

MA

7. Health & Safety

7.1 Health & Safety Update

The Board noted the "*Health & Safety Update Report*".

The Board asked for clarification in relation to the process in place to capture and analyse near misses. Ms Anderson agreed to follow up to clarify.

8. Finance & Business

8.1 Finance Update Report

Mrs Francis presented the “*AFBI Finance Update Report*” highlighting a significant improvement on the projected outturn position due to the work taking place across the organisation to identify opportunities for spend. Mrs Francis noted AFBI’s core activities were currently forecast to be delivered within budget tolerance. However there was still an underspend in relation to covid testing due to the reduction in testing numbers.

The Board noted there had been more progress following the Finance & Business Strategy Committee Meeting on 11 March 2021.

The Board asked if any Royalty income had been received. Mrs Francis responded that Queens University Belfast (QUB) have reported to AFBI that they have now received a royalties payment and AFBI have in turn invoiced QUB for these.

The Board enquired in relation to likely capital outturn. After discussion they noted the improvement in the capital position as compared to previous years.

Significant work will continue both within Finance and across Branches until the end of the financial year to receipt the number of Purchase Orders raised.

The Board commended Finance and staff across all of the Divisions for all their hard work and efforts.

Ms Morag Abernethy left the meeting.

LUNCH (12.25 – 1PM)

9. Draft Science Strategy 2030

Dr Magowan delivered a presentation to the Board on the Draft Science Strategy 2030. This outlined the process to develop the AFBI 2030 Science Strategic Framework' and feedback received to date.

The Board thanked Dr Magowan for her presentation and welcomed the Draft Science Strategy

Mrs Kelly commended Dr Magowan and those involved in the development of the draft strategy. The final draft will be produced for a future Board Meeting.

It was agreed that AFBI would contact external Stakeholders in April to formally consult on the draft AFBI 2030 Science Strategic Framework.

EM

The Board also asked the Executive look at two formats for the Strategy, one the formal format as presented and a second one with a more user friendly format for different audiences.

10. Draft AFBI Business Plan 2021/22

Mr Montgomery provided an update on the "*Draft AFBI Business Plan 2021/22*". He outlined that the Plan had been developed in consultation with the Board, the Executive and Heads of Branch. The Plan sets out the key targets for the delivery of the 3 strategic objectives and the alignment with DAERA's strategic objectives.

The Board confirmed that they were content for the draft Plan to be submitted to DAERA in line with timescales. Board members also suggested that it would be beneficial for Mrs Kelly to request an opportunity to present the Business Plan at the DAERA Board Meeting in April.

JK

The Board also asked the Executive look at two formats for the Plan, one the formal format and a second one with a more user friendly format for different audiences.

Mrs Kelly thanked Mr Montgomery for drafting the 2021/22 Business Plan.

Mr Solomon left the meeting.

11. Board Sub-Committees

11.1 Report of the Finance & Business Strategy Committee Meeting held on 11 March 2021

The Board noted the draft Minutes of the Finance and Business Strategy Committee Meeting which was held on 11 March 2021. The Chair of the Committee highlighted the main topics of discussion at the Meeting which including discussions around the 9 months Accounts.

Sub-Committee Self-Assessment Exercise results will be collated by Mr Montgomery and presented at April Board Meeting.

GM

11.1.2 Report of the Additional Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 18 March 2021

Nothing further to report.

11.1.3 Report of the Oversight & Governance Committee Meeting held on 18 March 2021

Nothing further to report.

12. Chair's Remarks

The Chair advised that he had a positive meeting with Mr Brian Doherty, DAERA.

The date for the DAERA Departmental Board / AFBI Board Joint Meeting has been advised as 9 June 2021. The Chair, Vice-Chair, Chairs of Sub-Committees and EMT to attend the meeting. It was agreed that Mrs Kelly, Mr Coffey and Mrs Brownlee would meet to draft an Agenda for the meeting.

**JK, RB &
CC**

The Chair outlined that the Non-Executive Director interviews were currently in progress.

The Board discussed planning for a proposed Board Away Day with the date and location to be confirmed.

JK

13. Any Other Business

14. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content that the meeting had been effective.

There being no further business the meeting ended at 14.30 hrs.

15. Date of Next Meeting

The next AFBI Board meeting is scheduled to take place on Thursday 29 April 2021 via Webex.