

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)  
Board Meeting held via WebEx  
on Thursday 28 October 2021 at 10.00hrs**

**Present**

**Board Members**

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair

Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Vice Chair

Ms Kate Burns

Ms Theresa Cullen

Mrs Fiona Hanna

Dr Michelle Costello-Smith

Dr Richard Horton

Ms Joan Houston

Mrs Sharon Smyth

**AFBI Board Apprentice**

Mr Nigel Morris

**AFBI Executive:**

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer

Mrs Josephine Kelly, Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs Division

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

Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division

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

**In Attendance**

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance

Mrs Stephanie Robinson, AFBI Secretariat

Mrs Bronagh McCotter, AFBI Secretariat

**Visitors**

Dr Alistair Carson, Chief Scientific Adviser, DAERA (Item 6)

Ms Pauline Rooney, Science Transformation Programme Project Lead, DAERA (Item 6)

**1. Welcome and Introduction**

**ACTION**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

## **2. Apologies**

Apologies were received from AFBI Board Member, Mr Richard Solomon.

## **3. Conflict of Interests Declaration**

None declared.

## **4. Draft Minutes of Previous Board Meeting held on 30 September 2021.**

The draft minutes from the Board meeting held on 30 September 2021 were accepted as an accurate and fair representation of the meeting.

### **4.1 Action Sheet from Previous Board Meeting held on 30 September 2021**

The Board noted that the actions as per the Action Sheet had been completed or included on the agenda for this meeting.

## **5. Brexit Update**

Dr Douglas provided an update on Brexit regarding supply chain issues, accreditation status and any additional resource requirements.

Dr Douglas reported that he was not aware of any significant supply chain issues arising from EU Exit. There have been some delays with specialist solvents but these have been managed through switching supply chains. Laboratory plastics supply remains a challenge but this has been ongoing due to COVID testing.

In terms of accreditation, he advised that discussions with DAERA and the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) are on-going regarding the impact of the NI Protocol and the Official Controls Regulation (OCR) requirements.

It was also noted that AFBI has inputted into a number of resource bids for additional funding to support increased laboratory activities arising from the outworking of EU Exit and the NI Protocol.

## 6. Update on DAERA's Science Strategy Presentation

The Chair introduced Dr Alistair Carson, Chief Scientific Adviser and Pauline Rooney, Lead for Science Transformation Programme of DAERA. They delivered a presentation entitled updating AFBI on "*Transforming DAERA's Science*"; on the explicit purpose and outcomes of the Science Transformation Programme's (STP), Research and Development (R&D) Operational Strategy Proposals. This included the Monitoring and Surveillance strategies.

Dr Carson provided an update on the direction DAERA was moving with the implementation of the STP. Ms Rooney confirmed that DAERA invests around a quarter of its annual Departmental Budget on scientific services, which includes monitoring and surveillance and research and development.

Dr Carson outlined DAERA's aims to utilise science to address strategic challenges to deliver Departmental and Programme for Government (PfG) objectives by 2030. He summarised the key messages on delivering DAERA's vision, principles and goals through the DAERA Science Strategy Framework.

Ms Rooney discussed how DAERA would optimise the use of science as a key enabler for the success of the STP's three goals i.e. to obtain the best science, get the best value from science and make the best use of science.

The Board asked how the balance of the three goals would be achieved and how this was received by the end user. A discussion followed on the role of science and the high level DAERA Science Strategy Framework processes that aims to deliver best value through research and engaging with stakeholders, experts and funders.

Dr Carson discussed DAERA's draft R&D Operational Strategy, focusing on the Innovation Strategic Outcomes. He highlighted the research approach envisaged involving collaboration with funders, providers and stakeholders. Ms Rooney outlined the key points of the R&D Strategy Mission Statement and future goals.

After a brief question and answer session, the Chair thanked Dr Carson and Ms Rooney for their time in presenting to the Board

and welcomed the commitment to continued dialogue between AFBI and DAERA on these matters.

## **7. Governance Issues**

### **7.1 Risk Management**

Mr Montgomery provided an update on AFBI's Risk Management position as outlined in the "*Risk Management Update*" paper. The Board noted the update on the current key risks.

Mr Montgomery advised that the Risk Review Group had held a recent workshop and to identify the key risks and to refresh the Corporate Risk Register. He advised that this was informed by the challenges and opportunities that identified at the Board Away Day in September.

Dr Douglas highlighted that discussions are ongoing with DAERA around Official Controls Regulation requirements in the area of Plant Health.

### **7.2 Fraud and Whistleblowing**

#### **7.2.1 *Report of New or Ongoing Cases***

Mr Montgomery reported that there were no new cases of fraud since the summary report provided to the Board in September 2021.

Mr Montgomery advised that there was one active case of whistleblowing brought forward from Quarter 4 of 2020/21. The report will be reviewed at the next ARAC meeting

### **7.3 Complaints**

#### **7.3.1 *Reports of New or Emerging Complaints***

Mr Montgomery reported that one corporate complaint had been received since the summary report was produced. He advised that the complaint was acknowledged and a response was issued in line with the policy timelines.

### 7.3.2 *Complaints Summary (Q2 2021/22)*

In noting the Complaints Summary (Q2 2021/22), the Board welcomed the dashboard format.

## 7.4 AFBI Business Plan 2021/22

### 7.4.1 *Corporate Key Performance Indicator Quarter 2 Outturns*

The Board noted the “Provisional Quarter 2 Outturn Position at 30 September 2021”. Mr Montgomery highlighted that staff performance appraisals had exceeded the target at 30 June 2021 with 93% (KPI 13) having been completed by that date. It was reported that all other KPIs were on target and there were no areas for concern.

During discussions, the following points were noted:

- KPI 4 – Reported as on target for scientific outputs as pathways to impact. A further meeting would be arranged for further detail and clarification with the Chair, Dr Magowan, Dr Douglas and Mr Schön.
- KPI 6 – The Board queried the narrative in relation to KPI 6, given the letter received from DAERA in relation to the delivery of E&I Projects.
- KPI 14 – The progress on the project management and costing projects was noted but the delay in procuring new finance systems was discussed. It was confirmed that this item would be discussed in more detail at the Finance and Business & Audit Committees.

**Sec**

The Chair congratulated the team on the good progress reported.

## 7.5 *CEO Assurance Statement*

The Board noted the Accounting Officer Assurance Statement 2021-22 Quarter 2 as per the Governance and Accountability arrangements.

## 8. Health & Safety

### 8.1 Health and Safety - Update

The Board noted the “AFBI H&S Paper to Board – October 2021” outlining the key points of the priority work. Mrs Kelly advised that the Head of Health & Safety and Dangerous Goods compliance Branch, will be shortly leaving the Institute. The Board agreed that they should write to the staff member in recognition of their significant contribution to the Institute.

**Exec**

Mrs Kelly provided an update on a potential Covid-19 cluster at an AFBI site and she would report back on the matter.

**JK**

## 9. Finance & Business

### 9.1 Finance Update Report

Mrs Kelly presented the “*Finance Update Report*”.

Mrs Kelly advised that AFBI had provided returns for the January monitoring round to DAERA through Sponsor Branch. The report provided details of the bids being made and the technical adjustments. If these bids were approved, then with careful monitoring a balance budget should be achieved.

Mrs Kelly detailed the current DAERA allocated budget following the October monitoring round budget an update on the variances as reported at last month’s Board meeting, as well as the forecast with the January Monitoring Round submission.

Mrs Kelly provided an update on the operational budget pressure. She highlighted that the forecast overspend on staff costs had now been reduced to £1.5m from the last information provided in the October budget meetings and also through the capitalisation of appropriate staff costs. The Board referred to the increased request for capital R&D to cover the associated staffing requirements. Mrs Kelly advised that a presentation had been provided for the last Finance & Business Committee on the accounting principles. Mrs Kelly advised that consistent principles had been applied throughout the year.

Mrs Kelly outlined that a review had also been undertaken with regards to Overhead costs, however she noted the projected increase in utility costs due to inflationary cost pressures.

Mrs Kelly confirmed that the six month accounts have been completed. These will be provided to the next Finance and Business Strategy Committee (FBSC) and Mrs Kelly agreed to circulate them in advance to Committee members.

**JK**

Mrs Kelly referred to the recurrent capital budget. Capital projects have been reviewed, taking into account information from CPD on the procurement processes. Due to risks with ensuring delivery prior to 31 March 2022, some items have been removed from the current forecast. AFBI will continue with the procurement processes for delivery in early 2022/23 and will keep in close contact with DAERA should earlier delivery times become available. She highlighted in particular the adjustments to the forecasted capital expenditure and the replacement of the new research vessel and the Green Growth infrastructure.

Dr McDowell highlighted the amount of work that had been undertaken by staff in Divisions and Finance to work towards a balanced position.

Mrs Kelly advised that discussions were ongoing with Queen's University Belfast (QUB) with regards to Royalties. She added that QUB had advised that an agreement with one of the pharmaceutical companies was imminent and that she also highlighted that there had been recent engagement with the other pharmaceutical company. The Board welcomed this progress.

## **9.2** Annual Reports and Accounts 2020/21 and NIAO Report to those Charged with Governance 2020/21

Mrs Kelly reported that the NIAO audit of AFBI's 2020-21 Annual Report and Accounts was almost complete, however they were awaiting further information on Corporation tax from the outcomes of an external review commissioned by AFBI. She advised that the planned Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) would be re-arranged.

**JK**

Mrs Kelly outlined a further recent query from the external audit received regarding assets and she agreed to undertake some further work and report back. **JK**

The Board referred to the completion of tax returns. It was agreed that this would be taken forward at the next FBSC meeting. **JK**

### **9.3** Directed Research Fund (DRF) Policy

Mrs Kelly presented the revised "*Directed Research Fund Policy and Procedures*" for Board approval.

Mrs Kelly advised that the introduction of the CORA system will change processes and procedures and this will be reviewed.

The Board referred to commercial contracts and it was noted that legal advice was being sought regarding potential competitive advantage. **JK**

The Board approved the DRF policy having sought assurance that there were appropriate management systems in place to manage it. Mrs Kelly added that the current processes were kept under review and were monitored. Further changes were expected with the introduction of the new software in April 2022.

## **10. Executive Report**

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

Dr McDowell advised that the Executive Management Team (EMT) have met on a number of occasions to review staff complement and to consider priority posts.

Dr McDowell noted that EMT have been meeting to start the development of a new Corporate Plan for 2022-26 and an update will be provided at a future Board meeting.

Dr McDowell outlined a number of recent key meetings, including three visits by the DAERA Permanent Secretary to AFBI sites, a meeting with the Chief Executive of the Food Standards Agency



(FSA) and the Director of FSA (NI) and the AFBI/QUB Alliance Stakeholder Dinner.

## **11. Evidence and Innovation (E&I) Report**

Dr Magowan provided an update on E&I projects. She noted that due to the training and new procedures by AFBI in 2020-21, compliance had increased to 75% and further improvements were planned.

## **12. Green Growth Update**

Mr Schön advised that the Business Case had been submitted and AFBI was awaiting a response.

The Board expressed disappointment that the projected expenditure had been moved to 2022-23 instead had been significantly reduced in year and had been moved to 2022-23.

## **13. Board Sub-Committees**

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

#### **13.1.1 *Report of the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting held on 8 October 2021***

It was noted that the minutes would be presented in due course.

**Sec**

#### **13.1.2 *Report of the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 18 October 2021***

The Board noted the draft minutes from the meeting held on 18 October 2021.

The Chair of the Committee advised that the Terms of Reference for the Committee had been considered in detail at a meeting with the Chair of the Finance & Business Strategy Committee and Dr Horton.

**13.1.3** *Minutes of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 20 May 2021 and 8 September 2021*

The Board noted the minutes from the meeting held on 20 May 2021 and the draft minutes of the meeting held on 8 September 2021.

**14. Chair's Remarks**

The Chair reported that he had attended a number of meetings and high profile stakeholder events recently, including the AFBI/QUB Alliance Stakeholder Event, attended by the DAERA Minister on 19 October 2021, the British Veterinary Association Dinner and the NI Food and Drink Association (NIFDA) Annual Dinner.

The Chair advised that he had been in discussions with DAERA in regards Board member appointments and that further correspondence on the issue was expected.

**15. Any Other Business**

The Board requested a summary report on AFBI's membership of the Centre for Innovation Excellence in Livestock (CIEL) to outline the use of and research arising from CIEL funded purchases. Dr Elizabeth Magowan agreed to provide to a future Board meeting.

**EM**

**16. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness**

The Board was content the meeting had been effective.

**17. Date of Next Meeting**

Thursday 25 November 2021