

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)
Board Meeting held in AFBI Crossnacreevy and via WebEx
on Thursday 1 December 2022 at 10.00hrs**

Board Members

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair	Mr Bill Montgomery
Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Deputy Chair	Mr Ian Murphy
Ms Kate Burns	Mr Tim McClelland
Mr Martyn Blair	Ms Therese Rafferty
Mr David Campbell	Mr Tom Tynan
Mrs Daphne Johnston	Mr Tom Wright
Mr Alan Moore	

AFBI Boardroom Apprentice

Mr Jonathan Craig

AFBI Executive:

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer
Prof Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division
Mr Ivor Johnston, Interim Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs 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
Mr James Adams, AFBI Secretariat

1. Welcome and Introduction

ACTION

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

An apology was received on behalf of Board member, Prof Sally Shortall.

3. Conflicts of Interest Declaration

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

The Chair informed the Board of some recent changes in terms of appointments and that his Register of Interests had been updated to reflect the changes. Mr Montgomery also informed the Board of a recent appointment and his Register of Interest will be updated accordingly.

4. Draft Minutes of Board Meeting held on 3 November 2022

The draft minutes of the Board Meeting held on 3 November 2022 were accepted as an accurate and fair representation of the meeting.

4.1 Action Sheet from Board Meeting held on 03 November 2022

The Board noted that the actions as per the Action Sheet had been completed or formed part of the agenda, except for the following:

Soil Nutrient Health Scheme (SNHS)

Mr Schön advised that the SNHS project was proceeding well but acknowledged that current staffing levels can impact on the wider work programme of the Division. The Board noted wider issue of staff recruitment and retention as a key focus of the Executive and that the matter is discussed in detail at a number of Board and Committee meetings.

5. Board Sub-Committees

5.1 Reports from Board Sub Committees

5.1.1 *Report of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 10 November 2022*

The Board noted the minutes of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 10 November 2022. Mrs Johnston also highlighted a number of key points from the meeting including staff engagement, the leadership programme and performance management.

A main focus of the Committee meeting was around staff recruitment and retention given the current challenges being faced across multiple sectors. The Board discussed the matter in detail and the significant challenges faced by AFBI was recognised by all attendees. The CEO confirmed that this area was a key priority for AFBI and highlighted a number of initiatives being taken forward to address the risks. The Board asked that a detailed progress update be brought to the March Board meeting.

**Exec/
Sec**

5.1.2 *Report on the Oversight & Governance Committee Meeting held on 14 September 2022 and 30 November 2022*

The Board noted the minutes of the Oversight & Governance Committee Meeting held on 14 September 2022.

Mr Moore updated the Board on the Oversight & Governance Committee meeting held on 30 November 2022. He highlighted the updates on Large and Complex projects and the progress in implementing the AFBI Project Portfolio Management System (PPM) CORA. Key areas of risk were also discussed at length with the Executive.

5.1.4 *Report on the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 25 October 2022 and 14 November 2022*

The Board noted the minutes of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 25 October 2022 reported on at the November Board meeting.

The Board also noted the minutes of the extraordinary Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held and 14 November 2022. Mr Wright reported that the Committee had been presented with the Northern Ireland Audit Office's draft Audit Strategy regarding AFBI's 2021-22 Accounts and summarised discussions in relation to the document.

6. Governance Issues

6.1 Risk Management

6.1.1 *Reports of New or Emerging Risks*

There were no reports of any new or emerging risks.

6.2 Fraud and Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns

6.2.1 *Reports of new or Ongoing Cases*

The Board noted the report and that one new case of Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns which had been taken forward in line with the AFBI Policy.

6.3 AFBI Corporate Plan 2022-2026

The Board noted the revised version of the AFBI Corporate Plan 2022-2026. Board members were asked to provide any comments to the Executive prior to further discussion at the Board Workshop in January 2023.

**Board/
Sec**

The CEO suggested the launch of the revised AFBI Vision and Purpose at the forthcoming staff roadshows and the Board was content with this action.

7. **Health & Safety**

7.1 Health & Safety Update

The Board noted the *'Health and Safety Update Report'* dated November 2022.

In terms of recruitment competitions for the Health & Safety and Compliance Branch, Mr Johnston informed the Board that a number of appointments had been made and that the Health & Safety Staff Officer posts would be advertised shortly.

8. **Overview of Crossnacreevy – Presentation**

Dr Lisa Black gave a high level presentation on the work of AFBI Crossnacreevy. The Plant Testing Station undertakes plant variety testing, agronomic research as well as seed testing and certification which includes the production of a number of recommended lists on

behalf of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

Plant variety testing plays a crucial role in creating productive, sustainable and resilient agricultural systems through improved yield and quality by ensuring that crops and grassland are optimally adapted over time. This is vital to meet modern day challenges of an increasing population alongside reducing chemical controls and combating climate change.

Dr Black outlined the two plant variety evaluation methods used at Crossnacreevy as Distinct Uniform Stable (DUS) and Value for Cultivation Use (VCU). She also highlighted the work undertaken in relation to an AFBI led EU Horizon 2020 INNOVAR project '*Next generation variety testing for improved cropping on European farmland*' which includes the use of phenomics, genomics and machine learning.

In relation to agronomic research, Dr Black highlighted the work on the DAERA Evidence and Innovation project around the impact of organic manures on soil and crops and the '*Mycotox-I*', a multi partner and cross boarder project, which will assess and reduce the risk of mycotoxins in Irish cereal grain

The Board thanked Dr Black for her excellent presentation and noted the synergies between the statutory work and DAERA and external research projects. A copy of today's presentation will be provided to the Board and a tour of the Official Seed Testing station will take place at the conclusion of the Board meeting.

Sec

9. Staff Engagement Update

The Board welcomed the detailed '*Staff Engagement Action Plan – November 2022*' which highlights the proposed actions aimed to deliver improvements in a number of key areas identified by the staff engagement survey. Each area is being led by a member of the Executive who meet on a regular basis to discuss cross-cutting issues. The action plan is aligned to the AFBI People Strategy.

In the discussion that followed the Chair emphasised the need to dedicate senior management time to staff engagement. In terms of

Board and Committee meeting demands on the Executive, it was agreed that this would be considered further at a Board Workshop.

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10. Finance & Business

10.1 Finance Update Report

Mr Johnston presented the Finance update paper and summarised a number of points including the following:

- Recent indications from DAERA are that AFBI will receive its Third Monitoring Round bid in full for 2022-23 (including a reduced bid for cost of living pressures).
- A commissioning note has been issued in relation to submission of the AFBI Budget bid for 2023-26. Going forward indications from DAERA are that it is unlikely that additional allocations approved during 2022-23 Monitoring Rounds will be included in AFBI's baseline budget.
- The Northern Ireland Audit Office's audit of the 2021-22 Annual Report & Accounts commenced on 15 November 2022 and the current timeline for certification is March 2023.
- AFBI completed the dry run of a consolidation pack for the 2021-22 AFBI Accounts and feedback from DAERA was positive. The deadline for the completion of a 2022-23 Consolidation Pack is 24 April 2023 and AFBI is continuing to liaise with DAERA around planning and monitoring.

The Board thanked Mr Johnston for the update. In response to a query on the in-year capital spend the Executive assured the Board that it is currently confident that the budget will be fully utilised.

11. Executive Report

The CEO presented the Executive Report for December 2022. He highlighted that Year 2 of the Senior Leadership programme had commenced on 24 November 2022 and updated the Board on progress in relation to a number of key corporate projects.

There was a discussion on the range of infrastructure projects. The Executive provided a number of updates on current positions and the importance for such projects to align with future areas of need and partnership working.

12. Chair's Remarks

The Chair commented on recent engagements including the excellent AFBI Science Outlook Conference held on the 9 November 2022. He asked that congratulations from the Board be passed to all staff involved.

13. Any Other Business

13.1 Rearrangement of the Board Visit to the AFBI Research Vessel

Mr Schon informed the Board that proposed dates for the rescheduled Board visit to the AFBI Research Vessel will be sought shortly.

14. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content the meeting had been effective.

15. Date of Next Meeting

The next AFBI Board Workshop will be held on Thursday 12 January 2023.