

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)
Board Meeting held in the Boardroom, AFBI Newforge
on Thursday 14 September 2023 at 10.00hrs**

Board Members

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair
Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Deputy Chair
Mr Martyn Blair
Ms Kate Burns
Mrs Daphne Johnston
Mr Bill Montgomery

Mr Alan Moore
Ian Murphy
Mr Tim McClelland
Ms Therese Rafferty
Mr Tom Tynan
Mr Tom Wright

Boardroom Apprentice

Ms Laura Ferguson

AFBI Executive:

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer
Prof Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division
Mr Pieter-Jan Schön, Director of Environment and Marine Sciences Division
Mr Conor O'Neill, Head of Finance (Item 9)

In Attendance

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance
Dr Adam Mellor, Principal Scientific Officer, Fisheries and Aquatic Ecosystems Branch
(Item 10)
Dr David McCleery, Science Strategy Lead (Item 12)
Mr James Adams, AFBI Secretariat

Visitors

Ms Cheryl Robinson, Business Consultancy Services (BCS) (Item 5)
Ms Martina McKevitt, BCS (Item 5)
Mr Peter McElhinney BCS (Item 5)

1. Welcome and Introduction

ACTION

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting, in particular the new AFBI Boardroom Apprentice Ms Laura Ferguson.

2. Apologies

Apologies were received on behalf of the Board Members, Mr David Campbell and Prof Sally Shortall.

Apologies were also received from the Executive on behalf of Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division and Mr Ivor Johnston, Interim Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs Division. The Board asked the Executive to consider providing a deputy at future meetings when a Director is unable to attend.

3. Conflicts of Interest Declaration

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

4. Draft Minutes of Board Meeting held on 4 July 2023

The draft minutes of the Board Meeting held on 4 July 2023 were accepted as an accurate and fair representation of the meeting.

4.1 Action Sheet from Board Meeting held on 4 July 2023

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

The detailed review of the AFBI Corporate Risk Register has been deferred until after the completion of the Executive's upcoming quarterly review and will be on the agenda of the next Board meeting.

Sec

5. Business Consultancy Services (BCS)

5.1 External Review of AFBI Board Effectiveness – Draft Report

The Chair welcomed the representatives from BCS who were giving a presentation on the findings from their external review of Board Effectiveness.

Ms Robinson thanked all participants and described the review as positive. She recapped on the review's Terms of Reference (ToR), approach undertaken, key findings and the resulting nine recommendations based on their observations and feedback from the AFBI Board and Executive.

The Board discussed the recommendation around Committee structure and it was noted that this was an opportunity for the Board to collectively review all Committees ToR to reduce any potential duplication of effort and ensure they are as effective as possible.

The Board also made a few suggestions in terms of the draft report and it was agreed that any further comments would be submitted to Mr Montgomery by 21 September 2023 to enable the report to be finalised. Once finalised it was also agreed that the report should be shared with key stakeholders in DAERA.

**Board/
GM**

The Chair thanked BCS for attending today's meeting and for their work in undertaking the external review.

6. Board Sub-Committees

6.1 Report of the Science Strategy Committee held on 19 June 2023 and Report of the Science Strategy Committee held on 12 September 2023.

The Board noted the minutes of the Science Strategy Committee meeting held on 19 June 2023.

Ms Burns summarised the discussions at the Committee meeting held on 12 September 2023 and highlighted a number of key points including the reporting on delivering DAERA's Evidence and Innovation projects and AFBI's report on 2023/24 Assigned Work Programme. It was also noted that there had been over 90% uptake in year 2 of the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme. The Board congratulated the staff for their efforts in helping to secure continued high levels of participation in the scheme.

6.2 Report of the Oversight & Governance Committee Meeting held on 20 June 2023

The Board noted the minutes of the Oversight & Governance Committee Meeting held on 20 June 2023.

6.3 AFBI Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Annual Report 2022-23

The Board noted the detailed AFBI Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Annual Report 2022-23.

Mr Wright highlighted that within the report it indicates that the Committee had undertaken its self-assessment exercise and the results have shown that the Committee is effectively meeting its ToR which provides and assurance to the Board and AFBI's Accounting Officer.

7. Governance Issues

7.1 Risk Management

7.1.1 *Reports of New or Emerging Risks*

The Board were made aware of one emerging risk in relation to pending industrial action later this month. Reviews of work areas are being undertaken and contingency plans are being put in place to mitigate the risks.

The Board asked if there was any risk in relation to Reinforced Autoclaved Aerated Concrete (RAAC) which has affected many schools in the UK in recent weeks. The Executive advised that they have been corresponding with DAERA on the matter and is seeking clarification. While it was noted that DAERA undertakes a schedule of condition surveys, the Chair offered to write to DAERA in relation to this matter.

**Exec /
Chair**

A query was raised regarding the recent lessons learned and other reviews and how AFBI is taking recommendations from these forward. It was noted that work is underway to collate action plans to address the areas concerned. The Head of Governance and Performance, Chair of the Board and Chair of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee recently met to discuss this matter and once

the action plans are fully developed they will be shared with the Board.

On the matter of protection of personal data, it was noted that AFBI Internal Audit's annual plan includes a review of compliance with General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Personal data is also securely stored on the NICS shared service HR Connect. The Deputy Chair indicated that the matter will be discussed further at the next Organisational Development & Human Resources Committee to seek further assurances.

7.2 Fraud and Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns

7.2.1 *Reports of new or Ongoing Cases*

Mr Montgomery reported that there were no new cases of Fraud or Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns since the last report to the Board. The Board noted the position in relation to two ongoing cases of Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns are in the process of being closed out.

In relation to disseminating the message of 'If in doubt, Speak Out' to staff as discussed at the July Board meeting, the Chair emphasised that the message must be delivered by the Executive through a top-down approach to ensure that the message is front and centre of AFBI. While the Board accepted that communications had been issued via e-mail, the staff newsletter and is a standing item on divisional meetings, they asked for further assurance that the message is being effectively disseminated.

7.3 Centre for Innovation Excellence in Livestock (CIEL)

Prof Magowan presented papers in relation to CIEL. She set the background and context in relation to the establishment of CIEL and its relationship with AFBI. Due to the proposed merger of CIEL with two other agri-tech centres, Prof Magowan outlined the considerations for AFBI and the proposed next steps.

Following a detailed discussion on a range of matters including any potential implications for AFBI, it was agreed that a small working group, of Board and Executive members, would meet next week to further discuss the proposals.

**EM/
Sec**

8. Health & Safety Update

The Board noted the Health & Safety Update Report.

The CEO also advised that the Health, Safety and Compliance Branch is working closely with AFBI HR on compliance with mandatory training.

9. Finance & Business

9.1 Finance Update Report

Mr O'Neill presented the Finance paper and highlighted the following key areas:

2023-24 Budget Update

While AFBI is currently projecting a balanced budget at this stage, a high dependency on receipt of funding for EU Exit & Windsor Framework implementation remains. This has been included in the DAERA commissioned second monitoring round and while this bid may not be met at this stage, the CEO had received assurances from DAERA that AFBI will have no issues accessing the funding required to deliver the necessary work.

Mr O'Neill referred to the exercise on corporate overheads and that Finance had received a report from AFBI Estates which is being analysed to identify any efficiency savings that can be made.

In relation to capital projects it was noted that the projected capital spend for the replacement of the AFBI research vessel can still be utilised in-year but this remains subject to the approval of the final business case.

Following DAERA's Resource Economics Branch (REB) review of the Green Growth R&D Platform Economic Appraisal, the Outline Business Case (OBC) will be forward to DAERA's case work committee for consideration as a program level Outline Business Case (OBC). Subject to approval, AFBI will now in addition be required to submit individual project level OBCs. It was noted that AFBI will be discussing

the number of OBCs required with DAERA and prioritise OBCs to see if some of the capital investment can be achieved 2023/24.

2022-23 AFBI Annual Report and Accounts

The audit of the 2022-23 Annual Report and Accounts is continuing and the Northern Ireland Audit Office's (NIAO) Audit Strategy indicates a planned certification date of 31 October 2023. While this is close to the statutory deadline for laying the accounts, the Board noted the steps AFBI has taken to meet a six-to-eight-week audit fieldwork timetable and that the Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs holds weekly meetings with the NIAO's senior auditor.

10. Presentation – Living with Water Programme

The Board welcomed Dr Adam Mellor who provided the Board with a presentation on AFBI's involvement in the '*Living With Water Programme (LWWP)*'. The project was commissioned by the Department for Infrastructure to develop an integrated plan for drainage and waste water management in greater Belfast.

AFBI was selected as the science provider and while the Belfast catchment area is urban, Dr Mellor highlighted that project approaches taken can and will benefit rural catchments. He highlighted areas of LWWP Modelling including areas such as natural water, land and marine data, drainage areas and nitrogen loading.

The project has had a number of major impacts including major savings from a targeted investment design, regulatory approval of investment proposals, improved water quality and new quality assurance methods to satisfy independent assessments. In terms of AFBI, benefits have included innovative firsts in model integration, several publications from ecosystem modelling and AFBI at the forefront of DEFRA working groups on Catchment modelling.

In the future it was noted that catchment approaches could be applied to problem catchment areas in agriculture and a number of tools could be used to support sustainable agriculture through identifying opportunities and risks.

Following brief question and answers session, the Board and Executive thanked Dr Mellor for his excellent presentation and the work undertaken in this flagship project.

11. DAERA Departmental Board Feedback on AFBI Corporate Plan 2023-2027 & AFBI Business Plan 2023-24

The Board noted the feedback from the DAERA Departmental Board on the AFBI Corporate Plan 2023-2027 & AFBI Business Plan 2023-24 as well as the actions undertaken by the Executive to address the comments.

The CEO also highlighted the updating and addition of revised AFBI Values within the Corporate Plan. It was noted that these had been drafted by a working group and following a recent consultation with staff. Board Members were asked to provide any comments on the proposed Values within the next week.

Board

11.1 AFBI Business Plan 2023-24 - KPI Outturn at 30 June 2023

The Board noted the KPI Outturn position at 30 June 2023.

12. AFBI Science Strategy Update

Dr McCleery provided the Board with a presentation regarding the updated position with the development of the AFBI Science Strategy to 2030.

He highlighted the various steps undertaken including the activities, outcomes and impacts of the highly engaged cross-divisional Science Strategy Working Group during August and September.

He also outlined the aspects of communication and engagement plans including the structured information requests to the Heads of Branch (HoB). This is to request that HoBs articulate scientific direction with their staff and provide returns within the 4-week timeframe. This will be followed by Executive review and facilitated workshops.

The Chair thanked Dr McCleery for his update and noted that he will be meeting with senior DAERA representatives as part of the engagement process.

13. Stakeholder Discussion

It was agreed that this item would be deferred and taken forward as a topic for discussion at the Board away day.

14. DAERA/AFBI Joint Board Meeting

The Chair reminded attendees of the forthcoming DAERA/AFBI Joint Board meeting to be held on 10 October 2023 which will be attended by the Chair, Deputy Chair and the Chairs of the various Board Committees.

15. Chair's Remarks

The Chair provided the Board with an update on a recent meeting with DAERA officials and informed members that the competition for the Chair of the AFBI Board is expected to be advertised in October 2023.

16. Any Other Business

16.1 Completion of Term of Office – Ms Kate Burns

The Board noted that this was the last meeting for AFBI Board member, Ms Kate Burns. The Chair thanked her for her valuable input to the Board and that she should be very proud of the contributions and work undertaken as the Chair of the Science Strategy Committee. The CEO, on behalf of the Executive, also thanked Ms Burns for her excellent work, advice and support during her Term of Office.

17. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content the meeting had been effective and that all key areas of business had been thoroughly covered.

18. Date of Next Meeting

The next AFBI Board Meeting will be held on Thursday 2 November 2023.