

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)
Board Meeting held in the Boardroom, AFBI Newforge and virtually
on Tuesday 2 July 2024 at 10.00hrs**

Board Members

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair	Mr Ian Murphy
Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Deputy Chair	Ms Therese Rafferty
Mr David Campbell	Prof Sally Shortall
Mrs Daphne Johnston	Mr Tom Tynan
Mr Bill Montgomery	Mr Tom Wright
Mr Alan Moore	

AFBI Executive

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer
Prof 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
Mr Conor O'Neill, Head of Finance
Mrs Jenni Burrows, Digital, Data and Technology (DDaT) Project Lead
Mrs Stephanie Robinson, AFBI Secretariat

1. Welcome and Introduction

ACTION

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Apologies were received on behalf of AFBI Board members, Mr Martyn Blair and Mr Tim McClelland, Ms Laura Ferguson (Board Apprentice) and Mr Terry McGonigal (Interim Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs Division).

3. Conflicts of Interest Declaration

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

4. Draft Minutes of AFBI Board Meeting held on 21 May 2024

The draft minutes of the Board Meeting held on 21 May 2024 were accepted as accurate and a fair representation of the meeting.

4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 21 May 2024

The Board noted that the actions as per the Action Sheet had been completed or formed part of the agenda.

5. Board Sub-Committees

5.1 Report of the Finance & Business Strategy Committee Meeting held on 9 May 2024

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Finance & Business Strategy Committee Meeting held on 9 May 2024.

5.2 Report of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 15 May 2024

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 15 May 2024.

5.3 Report of the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting on 20 June 2024

Mr Moore summarised a number of key points from the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting held on 20 June 2024. He also commented on the presentation and discussion on AFBI's Project Portfolio Management (PPM) system, CORA. Mr Moore noted that it had been highlighted that CORA was not a financial system and that work remains ongoing in respect of bespoke financial elements and customisation that were being developed for the costing aspects.

5.4 Report of the Science Strategy Committee Meeting on 26 June 2024

In Mr McClelland's absence, Mr Tynan highlighted a number of points from the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 26 June 2024 including that the number of new contracts has increased over the last year and the value of these contracts has also increased. An update was provided on UK DELL project. There were excellent presentations made to the Committee from Dr Archie Murchie on Plant Health and Pest Management and Dr Ewan Hunter on Lough Neagh. Dr David McCleery provided an update on the AFBI Science Strategy and outlined the next steps including the development of an Action Plan.

There was also a brief discussion on AFBI collaborations and partnerships. The Chair enquired about the position in relation to the Agri-tech Catapult. Prof Magowan advised that while the intention was to gain Catapult status, at this point in times the organisation was operating as an agri-tech centre. She also noted that while no longer a member under the revised structure, AFBI is a key stakeholder in this initiative and engagement is ongoing.

5.5 Report of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) Meeting on 27 June 2024

While a number of key topics will be discussed as part of today's agenda, Mr Wright provided a brief summary of the key discussions at the recent ARAC meeting held on 27 June 2024.

He highlighted that five Internal Audit reports were reviewed and all had received a satisfactory assurance level. Mr Wright referred to the legacy audit recommendations and was pleased to note that the number not yet implemented had significantly reduced. He also congratulated the Executive and the Finance team on the work undertaken to complete the faster close of the 2023-24 Annual Report and Accounts.

6. Governance Issues

6.1 Risk Management

6.1.1 *Reports of New or Emerging Risks*

There were no new or emerging risks.

6.1.2 *Risk Management Update*

Mr Montgomery presented the Risk Management Update paper and summarised the key changes to the Corporate Risk Register (CRR) following its most recent review by AFBI's Risk Review Group (RRG), the Executive and ARAC.

The Committee noted the current position and justification for the reduction of two residual risk scores.

6.1.3 *Risk Management Strategy and Guidance*

Mr Montgomery presented AFBI's Risk Management Strategy and Guidance documents which had been updated to align with the HM Government's *'The Orange Book – Management of Risk'* which were considered at the recent meeting of ARAC on 27 June 2024.

A query was raised around the progress of incorporating risk management within CORA. It was noted that this work is ongoing and will provide central oversight around project level risks. Data enrichment will be a key driver in maximising benefits of risk management.

The Board welcomed the updated documents which it approved.

6.2 Fraud and Raising Concerns

6.2.1 *Reports of new or Ongoing Cases*

Mr Montgomery presented the report on Fraud and Raising Concerns which was noted by the Board.

There were no new or ongoing raising concerns cases but one new case of suspected fraud had recently been brought to the Executive's attention and is being investigated.

Two ongoing cases of suspected fraud are approaching the end of the investigation process and it was noted that, following further testing, the matters were not considered indicative of a wider issue.

6.2.2 *Raising Concerns Policy and Guidance*

Mr Montgomery presented the updated AFBI Raising Concerns Policy and Guidance for Line Managers.

Mr Montgomery highlighted the key changes to the documents which included the handling of disclosures raised by the public, clarification on what is/is not a concern and inclusion of a process to enable the raising of a concern directly with DAERA. It was noted that these changes had also been discussed in detail at the recent ARAC meeting on 27 June 2024.

The Board welcomed the revised policy and guidance and the additional clarity they provide. Mr Montgomery stated that increased awareness of the raising concerns process will be delivered to staff through a series of communications including roadshows, staff updates and attendance at divisional management meetings.

7. Health & Safety Update

The CEO presented the Health & Safety Update report. He also informed the Board that AFBI's overarching Health and Safety Advisory Group had met in June 2024 and discussed reporting and a number of cross-cutting matters.

The Board noted Health & Safety Report and discussed a number of incidents and near misses. The Chair was pleased to note the assurance from Directors on the level of AFBI's culture around Health & Safety and that the Health, Safety and Compliance Team will develop an action plan/campaign to reinforce awareness of staff responsibilities in relation to Health & Safety.

8. Finance & Business

8.1 Finance Update Report

Mr O'Neill presented the Finance paper and provided an update on the 2024-25 budget.

Mr O'Neill reported that the 2024-25 opening budget allocation was confirmed on 3 June 2024. The Board were informed that AFBI had received an element of inflationary uplift to its baseline Resource funding long with its Capital R&D and NI Protocol funding requests. In terms of other capital funding, it was noted that AFBI had received funding in respect of the Research Vessel replacement and a portion of the Green Growth request but had not been allocated funding for recurrent or systems capital .

While the Board was pleased to note the organisation was currently projecting a balanced budget, it was noted that this was predicated on a high level of external income being generated via delivery of the relevant non-GIA work programmes. The Board were also asked to note a number of additional issues which could give rise to budget pressures including the level of the 2024 staff pay award and any unexpected increase in utility costs. Chair asked that the next meeting of the Finance & Business Strategy Committee be brought forward to early October 2024 to facilitate key discussions on the in-year position.

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8.2 Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24

Mr O'Neill presented the draft Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24 for approval and he highlighted the significant work undertaken by all parties in relation to audit preparations and fieldwork. Challenges in terms of turnaround times and the depth of audit testing had been met and there had been weekly meetings between AFBI and the auditors to track progress of the audit in order to meet the faster close timeframe.

The AFBI Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24 had been reviewed by AFBI's ARAC prior to this meeting and it was noted that the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) proposes to certify the 2023-24 financial statements with an unqualified audit opinion.

Based on the discussions and the recommendation from the ARAC following their meeting on 27 June 2024, the Board was content to approve the AFBI Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24 for signing by the Chairman of the Board and the CEO as the AFBI Accounting Officer.

The Chair on behalf of the Board, thanked all those involved in the production and audit of the AFBI Annual Report and Accounts 2023-24.

9. Executive Report

The CEO presented the Executive Report and highlighted a number of points including the following:

- The results from the April Staff Engagement Survey have been received. The CEO highlighted there has been increase in the overall engagement index from 53% in the previous survey to 56% in the 2024 survey. The Chair congratulated the Executive on the increase and acknowledged the work that had been undertaken by the Executive.
- The work being undertaken by the Diversity Equity and Inclusion Working Group.
- A further draft of the Science Strategy was considered by the Science Strategy Committee at their meeting in June 2024.
- AFBI hosted two very successful open days at AFBI Hillsborough on 18 and 19 June 2024.
- The DAERA led Review of AFBI will be commencing shortly and engagement with Board members will be part of the process.
- A number of senior recruitment competitions, at Director and Head of Branch level have either recently been completed or are 'inflight'.

The Board discussed their ongoing concerns in relation to the effectiveness of knowledge transfer element of the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme (SNHS) which is being delivered by the College of Agriculture Food & Rural Enterprise (CAFRE). The Board stressed how important this element of the SNHS was to the achieving the required levels of behavioural change to deliver the overall outcome of improved nutrient management on farms within NI. It was agreed

Chair

that the Board further raise these concerns with the DAERA Minister in the interest of maximising the benefits from this key project.

10. Update on Lough Neagh

Mr Schön gave a presentation on the situation and potential future scientific work associated with Lough Neagh. It was noted that AFBI continue to be involved in ongoing discussion on the issue with DAERA. It was also noted that AFBI hosted a webinar on Lough Neagh on 19 April 2024 which was very well attended on the day and also attracted significant interest post webinar through AFBI's media platforms.

Mr Schön gave an overview of a number of matters including new data on nutrient loading from catchment recordings in 2023 and the potential for AFBI to acquire a vessel to enhance in-lough operations. He also outlined a number of potential DAERA Evidence & Innovation (E&I) projects which are being developed and which will focus on matters relating to Lough Neagh.

The Chair thanked Mr Schön for his update to the Board.

Mrs Daphne Johnston left the meeting.

11. Update on IT Systems

Mrs Burrows delivered an overview of and set the context for the development of a strategic roadmap, that will outline a clear vision and direction for Digital, Data and Technology (DDaT) over the next three years. This roadmap will set out AFBI's ambitions for developing better digital applications, systems and architecture; and for transforming how data is managed. This will help the Institute to become more efficient and will be an essential enabler to achieve the goals set out in AFBI's Corporate Plan and draft Science Strategy. Mrs Burrows outlined the key objectives and gave an overview of the current landscape.

12. Chair's Remarks

The Chair informed the Board of his recent meeting with a DAERA Deputy Secretary. He also informed the Board that interviews are

expected to be taking place for the AFBI Chair position during the summer.

The Chair reminded Board members of some housekeeping issues to take note of as we approach the summer period. He also advised that a number of exercises will be commissioned during this period and Board members should regularly keep abreast of AFBI communications.

13. Any Other Business

There were no additional items of business.

14. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

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

15. Date of Next Meeting

The next AFBI Board Meeting will be held on Tuesday 27 August 2024.