

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)
Board Meeting held in the Boardroom, AFBI Newforge / MS Teams
on Thursday 2 November 2023 at 10.30hrs**

Board Members

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

Boardroom Apprentice

Ms Laura Ferguson

AFBI Executive:

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer
Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division
Mr Ivor Johnston, Interim Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs Division
Prof Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food 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 (item 8.2)
Mrs Stephanie Robinson, AFBI Secretariat

1. Welcome and Introduction

ACTION

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

No apologies were received.

3. Conflicts of Interest Declaration

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

4. Draft Minutes of Board Meetings held on 14 and 22 September 2023

The draft minutes of the Board Meetings held on 14 and 22 September 2023 were accepted as accurate and fair representations of the meetings.

4.1 Action Sheet from Board Meeting held on 14 and 22 September 2023

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 Science Strategy Committee held on 12 September 2023.

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Science Strategy Committee meeting held on 12 September 2023. The Chair informed the Board that he would shortly be nominating a new Chair of the Science Strategy Committee given that Ms Burns had now completed her term of office.

Chair

5.2 Report of the Oversight & Governance Committee Meeting held on 12 October 2023

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Oversight & Governance Committee (OGC) Meeting held on 12 October 2023.

The Board noted that the OGC will meet again on 7 November 2023 to discuss matters pertaining to the Centre for Innovation Excellence in Livestock (CIEL).

The Board also briefly discussed the funding landscape and the additional collaboration opportunities that may be available to AFBI arising from the Agri-Tech Catapult.

5.3 Report of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 25 October 2023.

Mr Wright provided a verbal update on the key discussions at the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) meeting on 25 October 2023.

Discussion on the progress of the 2022-23 AFBI Annual Report and Accounts had taken place and this will be picked up later in the agenda.

Mr Wright also highlighted that Internal Audit had provided a proposed 3-year Internal Audit Strategy which was approved by the Committee. The Executive also presented a draft lessons learned action plan arising from the Finance Systems review. The Committee welcomed the plan and made a number of recommendations for the Executive to consider.

6. Governance Issues

6.1 Risk Management

6.1.1 *Reports of New or Emerging Risks*

Mr Montgomery reported that there were no new or emerging risks.

6.1.2 Quarterly Risk Management Update including review of the Corporate Risk Register

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

The reduction in CR6 '*Failure to recruit, retain and develop AFBI's workforce.*' was the key change in terms of scoring and while it remains a high level risk, scoring reflects recent progress.

Following a discussion, it was agreed that Risk Management would be an agenda item for the forthcoming AFBI Board workshop to be held on 7 December 2023. The Chair requested that the Board consider the risk environment prior to the workshop.

The Board reiterated its previous concerns on a number of matters in relation to the AFBI Estate. It was agreed that the AFBI Estate would be added as a separate item for the Board workshop in December 2023 and the Chair again offered to write to DAERA in relation to these matters.

6.2 Fraud and Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns

6.2.1 *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 report and the position in relation to the ongoing cases which have been, or are nearing, completion.

The Board sought assurance on the process for communicating any lessons learned following the conclusion of such cases. In response, the CEO advised that any lessons to be learned or crosscutting issues are discussed at Executive meetings. He also highlighted a recent presentation to Science Strategy Committee which gave an overview of the procedures and governance arrangements in place in relation to animal welfare.

6.3 AFBI Business Plan 2023-24 – KPI Outturns at 30 September 2023)

Mr Montgomery presented the paper on the provisional outturn of the 14 Corporate KPIs 2023-24 as at the end of Quarter 2, 30 September 2023.

It was agreed that KPI 14 Green Growth would be recorded as no longer applicable for 2023-24.

6.4 CEO Assurance Statement

The Board noted the CEO Assurance Statement 2023-24 – Quarter 2 and that it aligned with the Board’s understanding of the key issues within AFBI.

7. Health & Safety Update

The Board noted the Health & Safety Update Report.

Mr Johnston confirmed that the Health, Safety and Compliance (HSC) Branch was now at full complement. The Chair congratulated the Executive on the concerted efforts in strengthening the team which will enhance Health and Safety measures across AFBI.

It was noted that Board members had been required to complete H&S training last year. The Executive is to consider if further / refresher training is required.

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8. Finance & Business

8.1 Finance Update Report

Mr Johnston presented the Finance paper and highlighted a number of points, including the following:

- AFBI submitted a return to the DAERA commissioned Third Monitoring Round, which represents an overall decrease in total budget. The decreases related to a reduction in funding required to implement the Windsor Framework (due to recruitment delays and associated overheads arising from the delay in receiving funding approval), depreciation (due to asset purchase delays) and Green Growth (due to Business Case approvals delays);
- Should easements and realignments be accepted from the Third Monitoring Round bid, AFBI is forecasting a projected outturn within tolerance for 2023-24.
- There is currently an under allocation in relation to the Recurrent Capital budget due to some items no longer being deliverable in 2023/24 but Divisions have been allocated additional budget to ensure this is fully utilised.

The Board discussed a number of matters in relation to the in-year budget position as well as future opportunities to collaborate and avail of funding streams. The Board also commended AFBI on the ongoing delivery of the Soils Nutrient Health Scheme.

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It was also requested that the draft 2024-25 AFBI Budget be presented to the Board meeting in February 2024.

8.2 Annual Report and Accounts 2022-23

Mr Johnston presented the draft Annual Report and Accounts 2022-23 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 regular meetings between AFBI and the auditors to track progress of the audit in order to meet the demanding timeframe.

The AFBI Annual Report and Accounts 2022-23 had been reviewed by AFBI's ARAC immediately prior to this meeting and it was noted that the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) will certify the 2022-23 financial statements with an unqualified audit opinion. A separate report from the C&AG will be appended to the report.

Based on the discussions and the recommendation from the ARAC following their meeting earlier today, the Board was content to approve the AFBI Annual Report and Accounts 2022-23 for signing by the Chairman of the Board and the CEO.

The Chair on behalf of the Board, thanked all those involved in the production and audit of the AFBI Annual Report and Accounts 2022-23.

9. Executive Report

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

- A significant level recruitment has been ongoing across the organisation. An agency appointment has been made to

undertake a review of staff recruitment and retention in line with the relevant Corporate KPI.

- The Science strategy development work has continued to make progress with the intention that a draft would be available at the end of the calendar year.
- AFBI is awaiting formal response from DAERA on Corporate Plan 2023-26 and AFBI Business Plan 2023-24.
- The ISLAND project core design has been completed and testing underway.

The CEO referred to a number of very successful stakeholder events including a visit to AFBI Hillsborough by the Duke of Gloucester and the recent Soil Nutrient Health Scheme conference.

Mr Schön also provided the Board with an update on AFBI's ongoing work with regards to the Blue-green algae situation in Lough Neagh in collaboration with DAERA.

10. Update from Directors on Staff Engagement

The Directors took it in turn to provide an update on progress of the themes within the Staff Engagement Action Plan that they are leading on and also the work within their divisions in relation to staff engagement.

The Board thanked the Directors for their update for the progress made.

11. Chair's Remarks

The Chair provided the Board with an update on the recent DAERA/AFBI Board meeting and all AFBI attendees felt that it had been a very positive and productive meeting.

The Chair also informed the Board that he had recently been appointed as Chair of the Public Health Agency.

12. Any Other Business

The Board briefly discussed the Climate Change Act and enquired about carbon auditing and AFBI's work relevant to the Act. It was agreed that a presentation would be given at the Board workshop in

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December and that invitations will be issued to key stakeholders who will present on this area.

13. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

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

14. Date of Next Meeting

The next AFBI Board Meeting will be held on Thursday 7 December 2023 at AFBI Hillsborough.