

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)
Board Meeting held in the Boardroom, AFBI Newforge and virtually
on Wednesday 21 May 2024 at 9.30hrs**

Board Members

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| Mr Colin Coffey, Chair | Mr Ian Murphy |
| Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Deputy Chair | Mr Tim McClelland |
| Mr Martyn Blair | Ms Therese Rafferty |
| Mr David Campbell | Prof Sally Shortall |
| Mrs Daphne Johnston | Mr Tom Tynan |
| Mr Bill Montgomery | 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
Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division
Mr Pieter-Jan Schön, Director of Environment and Marine Sciences Division
Mr Terry McGonigal, Interim Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs Division

In Attendance

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance
Mr Conor O'Neill, Head of Finance (Item 8)
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 AFBI Board member, Mr Alan Moore.

3. Conflicts of Interest Declaration

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

4. Draft Minutes of AFBI Board Meeting held on 24 April 2024

The draft minutes of the Board Meeting held on 24 April 2024 were accepted as accurate and a fair representation of the meeting.

4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 24 April 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 Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 30 April 2024

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 30 April 2024.

Mr Wright summarised some of the key discussions around the 2023-24 Annual Report and Accounts, the outcomes of recent audit reports and the position with regard to the legacy audit recommendations.

Following a discussion around the progress in implementing the Project Portfolio Management (PPM) System, the Chair asked that the Board be provided with an assurance around AFBI systems and it was agreed that the AFBI Digital, Data and Technology Project Lead would provide an update to the AFBI Board.

Exec

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

Mr Tynan summarised the key points of the Finance & Business Strategy Committee Meeting held on 9 May 2024 including the positive provisional budget outturn for 2023-24 and the progress update on the implementation of CORA.

He highlighted the excellent work of AFBI as described in the Research Support Office's (RSO) report on '*New Bids and Contracts*'.

The total value of contracts is on an upward trend with close alignment to AFBI's strategic priorities. On the recently secured contracts, Mr Tynan pointed out an example of the valuable support the RSO provided in identifying additional funding streams.

Prof Shortall entered the meeting

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

Mrs Johnston highlighted a number of points from the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 15 May 2024. This included topics such as staff engagement, assistance to study, PhD studentships and health & wellbeing initiatives.

It was noted that Committee had also discussed a number of workforce planning matters including the review of recruitment and retention and the procedures in place for internal temporary promotions and external agency staff.

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 Workshop*

Mr Montgomery advised that AFBI's Risk Review Group (RRG) will be meeting shortly to finalise the content of the refreshed AFBI Corporate Risk Register (CRR) following the '*blank page*' review undertaken by the Executive. The revised CRR will be presented to the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) in June 2024.

Exec

In response to a query on assessing risks and opportunities in areas such as Artificial Intelligence (AI), it was noted such matters will be monitored through a risk on Strategic Planning. This risk wording reflects the need to '*Identify and respond to the increasing pace of change in terms of science, industry needs and technology*'.

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.

Mr Montgomery informed the Board that a review of AFBI's Raising Concerns Policy is being undertaken to ensure that it takes cognisance of any recent changes to the DAERA Policy and wider NICS framework. The updated documentation will be presented to the ARAC in June 2024.

Exec

6.3 AFBI Business Plan 2024-25 – Draft

The CEO presented the draft AFBI Business Plan 2024-25 and highlighted updates to the narrative that strengthen alignment with AFBI's Corporate Plan 2023-2027 and DAERA Ministerial priorities.

Following a detailed discussion which centred around strategic priorities and a number of the Key Performance Indicators, the Board confirmed that it was content to approve the draft AFBI Business Plan 2024-25 subject to the inclusion of budget information when it is available.

6.4 Standing Orders and Schedule of Matters reserved to the Board and AFBI Board Members Code of Conduct

The Standing Orders, Schedule of Matters Reserved to the Board and Scheme of Delegation as well as the AFBI Board Members Code of Conduct had been reviewed with no amendments proposed at this time. The Board noted the documents.

7. Health & Safety Update

The CEO informed the Board that information to date indicates that the incidents referred to in the previous report to the Board were isolated in nature. It was also noted that EMT had requested further detail from the Health, Safety and Compliance branch.

While it was also noted that IOSH Health and Safety training is being rolled out to Heads of Branch, the Chair referred to the wider matters

raised in the previous report to the Board in terms of ownership. He requested a further report to be provided at the next Board meeting to provide an assurance on the matters previously highlighted.

Exec

8. Finance & Business

8.1 Finance Update Report

AFBI Budget 2024-25

Mr McGonigal advised that DAERA are meeting shortly to consider scenarios for allocating opening budgets and it is hoped that AFBI will receive this before the end of May 2024. There is also likely to be a June Monitoring Round commissioned shortly after and this will have a very tight turnaround for completion.

Mr O'Neill summarised a number of tables that highlight AFBI's Resource baseline against the bids required to meet AFBI's Resource requirements for 2024-25. Mr O'Neill also highlighted AFBI's 2024-25 capital requirements together with the priority rating. On those high priority items, the Chair asked if associated business cases are being completed so as to potentially avail of any future funding. The Executive advised that business cases are being worked on internally and that a business case aligning to green growth was at an advanced stage.

2023-24 AFBI Annual Report and Accounts

The Board noted that the NIAO have commenced their audit of the 2023-24 Annual Report and Accounts with weekly meetings being held with AFBI Finance. AFBI remains on target to meet the faster close deadline.

9. Director Presentations

Each of the Scientific Directors provided a brief presentation on their respective division including an overview of their key priorities for the current financial year and the funding requirements for their Divisions.

Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division (SAFSD)

Prof Magowan highlighted the structure, footprint and strategic focus of SAFSD which is around '*Leading improvements in the Agri-Food Industry to drive sustainability*'. She outlined the key projects that are currently being delivered by SAFSD and how they support a number of science initiatives such as land use, sustainability and efficiency. The Board was also given an overview of communication and linkages with key stakeholders.

Veterinary Sciences Division (VSD)

Dr Douglas highlighted the strategic focus of VSD in the area of '*Protecting animal, plant and human health*' and how the work undertaken aligns with EU, GB and NI legislative requirements. He gave an overview of the main VSD programmes of work, how this feeds into delivering a programme of statutory testing and maintaining an emergency response capability which underpins such areas as NI/UK trade, animal health status and food safety. In conclusion Dr Douglas highlighted key areas of focus for 2024/25 including further development of capacity in areas such as genomics, molecular diagnostics, and antimicrobial resistance as well as key milestones for a number of systems and infrastructure projects.

The Chair left and the remainder of the meeting was chaired by Mrs Brownlee, Deputy Chair.

Mr Wright left the meeting

Environment and Marine Sciences Division (EMSD)

Mr Schön outlined the structure of the EMSD and the alignment of the Division to the strategic priority around '*Enhancing the Natural and Marine Environment*'. After summarising a range of science outcomes for 2023-24, he highlighted key areas of focus for 2024-25 including expanding quantitative science and modelling capacity, delivering on live Evidence & Innovation (E&I) as well as external projects. He also touched on the Research Vessel (RV) replacement project and the key steps for the current year 2024-25. It was noted that the replacement Research Vessel is a high profile project and requires significant staff time input.

Prof Shortall left the meeting

11. Chair's Remarks

Prior to his departure earlier in the meeting, the Chair updated the Board on his recent activities including his attendance at the Balmoral Show. He complemented the staff for their excellent engagement while working at the AFBI stand. The Executive will be reviewing the location of the AFBI stand as part of the feedback on the event.

12. Any Other Business

There were no additional items of business.

13. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

Mrs Brownlee sought feedback on the meeting effectiveness and a number of suggestions were made in terms of agenda structure including breaks at the appropriate time. Mrs Brownlee agreed to circulate the views and suggestions to the Chair.

RB

14. Date of Next Meeting

The next AFBI Board Meeting will be held on Tuesday 2 July 2024.