

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)  
Board Meeting held in Conference Hall, AFBI Hillsborough  
on Monday 22 May 2023 at 10.00hrs**

**Board Members**

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

**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  
Dr Rachal Cassidy, Principal Scientific Officer, Agri-Environment Branch (Item 10)  
Mr James Adams, AFBI Secretariat

**Visitor**

Mr Martin McKendry, Director of College of Agriculture, Food & Rural Enterprise (CAFRE)  
(Item 9)

**1. Welcome and Introduction**

**ACTION**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

## **2. Apologies**

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

## **3. Conflicts of Interest Declaration**

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

## **4. Draft Minutes of Board Meeting held on 20 April 2023**

The draft minutes of the Board Meeting held on 20 April 2023 were accepted as an accurate and fair representation of the meeting.

### **4.1 Action Sheet from Board Meeting held on 20 April 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 Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meetings held on 25 April 2023 and the 15 May 2023**

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee meeting held on 25 April 2023.

In providing a verbal update on the Committee meeting held on 15 May 2023, Mr Wright informed the Board that the final documentation from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) had been reviewed in relation to the AFBI Annual Report and Accounts 2021-22. It was the first meeting with the new Director from the NIAO and the Chair described early discussions at the meeting as very positive.

### **5.2 Report of the Organisational Development & Human Resources Committee held on 17 May 2023**

Mrs Johnston provided a verbal report on the Organisational Development & Human Resources Committee meeting held on 17 May 2023. This covered a number of topics including the quarterly update on HR Statistics, a presentation by the Head of Health & Safety

Compliance Branch, outcomes of the internal review of whistleblowing / raising concerns arrangements and an update on the progress of the staff engagement survey action plan. The Committee had been impressed with the draft staff flyer to be issued to staff on actions to date as a result of the findings of the staff engagement survey.

The Committee also discussed mandatory training and maintenance of training records. The Executive advised of the current arrangements and the challenges in collating data on mandatory training due to the complexity of training needs across the organisation and the various systems employed to record the training undertaken. Given the Board's concern, Mr Johnston agreed to bring a report on the matter to the next Board meeting.

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## **6. Governance Issues**

### **6.1 Risk Management**

#### **6.1.1 *Reports of New or Emerging Risks***

There were no new or emerging risks to report.

In relation to the Chair's query on risks in terms of budgeting, Mr Montgomery advised that there are risks in place to evaluate both in-year and longer-term financial risks with controls in place and mitigating actions to manage these as far as possible.

### **6.2 Fraud and Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns**

#### **6.2.1 *Reports of new or Ongoing Cases***

The Board noted that there were no new cases of Fraud or Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns since the last report to the Board.

Following a discussion in relation to one ongoing case on raising concern, the Board emphasised the need to ensure that the timelines for investigating and concluding cases be given the highest priority.

### **6.3** AFBI Business Plan 2022-2023 – Corporate Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) Provisional Year-end outturn

The Board noted the report on the provisional year-end outturn in relation to AFBI's Corporate KPIs 2022/23.

In relation to the delivery of '*KPI 2 - Delivery of 90 % Non-AWP research projects on time and on budget and to the satisfaction of customers*' the Board was informed that, while this has not been achieved, final ratification of the data sets is being undertaken in order to finalise the figures.

In terms of '*KPI 1 - Delivery of the DAERA Evidence & Innovation Research Programme to defined standards*' it is expected to be achieved with two final reports due to be provided.

It was further noted that all KPI outturns will be subject to a validation exercise by AFBI Internal Audit.

### **6.4** AFBI Board Performance – Self Assessment Exercise 2022-23

Mr Montgomery presented the paper on the AFBI Board's Self-Assessment Exercise 2022/23 and was pleased to report that there had been positive outcomes and a high level of consensus across the six key principles.

It was felt that overall scoring was reflective of several Board members completing their first year in the role. In relation to areas for possible attention, Board discussions focussed on enhancing relationships with stakeholder communities. Publication of the AFBI Corporate Plan 2023-27 and development of the AFBI Science Strategy were seen as important in ensuring development of relationships with key stakeholders as well as delivering key messages in appropriate forums.

The Chair acknowledged that building relationships with stakeholders takes time, and he will discuss this further, including the potential development of a stakeholder map, with the Executive.

**Chair**

## 7. Health & Safety

Mr Johnston informed the Board that there were no Reporting of Injuries, Diseases or Dangerous Occurrences (RIDDOR) incidents to report.

## 8. Finance & Business

### 8.1 Finance Update Report

Mr Johnston presented the Finance paper and updated the Board on the following:

#### 2022-23 Provisional Outturn

Mr Johnston confirmed that AFBI's 2022-23 provisional outturn, submitted to DAERA in April 2023, reflected an underspend within the 1% budget tolerance.

#### 2023-24 Budget Update

Following recent confirmation of DAERA's budget by the Secretary of State, AFBI has been issued an indicative 2023-24 Opening Resource Budget which represented a reduction on the 2021-22 baseline allocation. There was no change to the previously advised Capital R&D allocation.

The resource allocation presents AFBI with a resource funding gap for 2023-24 and Mr Johnston outlined the actions being taken by AFBI in order to bridge part of the gap. Efforts to address the remaining gap will include, in consultation with DAERA, a review of the scientific services provided to DAERA by AFBI.

The Chair asked that the impact of budget reductions on a divisional basis be articulated in the next update to the AFBI Board.

**Exec**

The Board welcomed the indicative capital investment in the area of 'Green Growth' and emphasised the importance of ensuring the timely submission and approval of business cases. The Chair asked to be informed of any delays in the finalisation of business cases and/or the approval process.

## 2021-22 Annual Report and Accounts

Mr Johnston informed the Board that the 2021-22 Annual Report and Accounts had been formally laid on the 12 May 2023. Work on the recommendations arising from the audit are being taken forward in conjunction with preparations of the 2022-23 Accounts.

## 2022-23 Annual Report and Accounts

AFBI has worked to the 'faster close' timetable of mid-May for production of a full Annual Report and Accounts. While the audit will commence in late July, in parallel with DAERA, production of the Annual Report and Accounts by May 2023 demonstrates AFBI's capability and capacity to meet the faster closing timetable.

In closing the discussions on the financial update, the Chair congratulated all those involved in achieving the 2022-23 Outturn position, forward planning in terms of the 2023-24 budget and completion of the audit process for 2021-22.

### **9. CAFRE Presentation – Mr Martin McKendry, Director of CAFRE**

Mr McKendry began his presentation by outlining CAFRE's position within DAERA and its footprint across NI which covers educational disciplines in agriculture, horticulture, environment, food and equine. He also highlighted the overall aim of CAFRE which focuses on delivering high quality education, knowledge transfer (KT) and innovation programmes to those entering or working in the Northern Ireland agri-food industry. The importance of close partnership working between AFBI and CAFRE was highlighted and that the establishment of various working groups between the organisations was contributing to improved partnership working.

A key area of importance for CAFRE is around the sustainability strategy. It holds the Linking Environment and Farming (LEAF) accreditation and Mr McKendry gave an overview of a number of medium-term estate related sustainability targets that CAFRE aims to deliver.

In terms of KT and innovation, he outlined a number of initiatives including technology demonstration farms, peer to peer groups, business development groups, farm innovation visits and a

professional development programme. He presented a pyramid diagram which showed how the initiatives may drive the KT and innovation agenda. On areas of new innovation and its acceleration, it was recognised that there could be several opportunities for AFBI and CAFRE to work together in order to have a research input into innovation initiatives.

The next steps include formal consultation with stakeholders on the model, training of staff and influencers and a launch of new programmes in Autumn 2023. Mr McKendry highlighted how vital this work is in order to widen participation and deliver the sustainability objectives over the next 10 years.

Following a question and answer session, the Board thanked Mr McKendry for his presentation and for giving his time to come to the AFBI Board.

#### **10. Soil Nutrient Health Scheme (SNHS) Presentation – Dr Rachel Cassidy**

Dr Cassidy gave a presentation to the Board on the progress of the SNHS. Over 136,000 registered fields in zone 1 had been sampled with further sampling having continued through April and May 2023. The remaining fields, approx. 5% of the total registered, will be included in mop-up sessions as part of the 2023-24 sampling schedule. Around 132,000 results have been supplied to farmers and almost 90,000 samples have been uploaded to the Online Dashboard and CAFRE Nutrient Calculator. It was noted that overall participation for Zone 1 SNHS had been very high.

Dr Cassidy then provided the Board with a brief overview of the interim results based on 127,000 of the fields already sampled. This included information around pH and phosphorus levels as well as provisional mapping that highlights the levels of various elements within the soil.

She also discussed the work around the development of 'Runoff Risk Maps' which involves outlining the entire drainage network. A fully automated, iterative model has been developed which will enable identification of areas at high risk of nutrient, sediment and contaminant loss during rainfall. It is envisaged that the maps will aid farmers to target nutrient applications and mitigation measures

which will reduce pollutant load in waterways and improve water quality.

In concluding the presentation, Dr Cassidy provided the Board with examples of how the SNHS results and maps will look to end users through using the online portal and preparations for Zone 2 with registration due to open on 26 June 2023.

The Board thanked Dr Cassidy for the excellent presentation and the continuing excellent work of the SNHS team.

**11. Chair's Remarks**

The Chair briefly updated the Board on recent engagements.

**12. Any Other Business**

There were no additional items of business.

**13. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness**

The Board was content the meeting had been effective.

**14. Date of Next Meeting**

The next AFBI Board Meeting will be held on Tuesday 4 July 2023.