

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)
Board Meeting held in AFBI Hillsborough and via WebEx
on Thursday 24 February 2022 at 10.00hrs**

Present

Board Members

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair (Hillsborough)
Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Vice Chair
Ms Kate Burns
Ms Theresa Cullen
Mrs Fiona Hanna
Mr Richard Solomon
Dr Richard Horton
Ms Joan Houston (Hillsborough)

Mrs Sharon Smyth
Mr Alan Moore
Mr Ian Murphy
Mr Tom Tynan (Hillsborough)
Mr Tom Wright (Hillsborough)
Mrs Daphne Johnston
Mr Tim McClelland (Hillsborough)
Mr David Campbell
Prof Sally Shortall

AFBI Board Apprentice

Mr Nigel Morris

AFBI Executive:

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer (Hillsborough)
Mrs Josephine Kelly, Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs Division (Hillsborough)
Dr Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division (Hillsborough)
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 Steven Morrison, Head of Livestock Production Sciences (Hillsborough) (Item 5)
Mrs Bronagh McCotter, AFBI Secretariat

1. Welcome and Introduction

ACTION

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Apologies were received from Dr Michelle Costello-Smith. It was noted that Mrs Burns would leave the meeting at 12.30 pm and Mr Solomon would leave at 1.15 pm.

3. Conflict of Interests Declaration

None declared.

4. Draft Minutes of Previous Board Meeting held on 27 January 2022.

The draft minutes from the Board meeting held on 27 January 2022 were accepted as an accurate and fair representation of the meeting.

4.1 Action Sheet from Previous Board Meeting held on 27 January 2022.

The Board noted that the actions as per the Action Sheet had been completed or included on the agenda for this meeting.

Mrs Kelly will provide an update on the EU Exit and NI Protocol in the Finance Update Report and it was noted that discussions on testing with DAERA's Brexit Readiness Team were ongoing.

5. Presentation by Dr Steven Morrison, Head of Livestock Production Sciences

The Chair introduced Dr Morrison, Head of AFBI's Livestock Production Sciences (LPS) Branch. Dr Morrison provided a presentation on the work of the Branch. The presentation centred on the main AFBI research farms, aligned to the four key challenges of improving environmental footprint of farming systems, improving productivity and resilience, enhancing food quality and protecting animal health and welfare.

Dr Morrison highlighted that work continued with AFBI's longstanding partnerships to deliver on the challenges and AFBI's role in future contribution to policy making.

A discussion followed around the impact on livestock nutritional requirements, grassland management and the work of AFBI in grass growth forecasting as well as AFBI's contribution through advisory networks within GB, which included communications through press and social media.

Dr Morrison highlighted the impact of the Bovine Information System (BovIS) in capturing and utilising data. He discussed the challenges faced among farmers and other stakeholders regarding the sustainability of NI agri-food sector and the importance of keeping stakeholders informed of advances in science.

He then highlighted what he considered were the priorities for AFBI in the delivery of holistic science based solutions to inform sustainable livestock farming. These priorities included staff recruitment in key positions and reviewing the Branch structure. A discussion followed on a number of topics including the delivery of a core facility upgrade, data issues and the Agri-Tech incubator concept. It was acknowledged that further development and collaboration of strategic alliances and partnerships would be of importance going forward.

The Chair thanked Dr Morrison for his excellent presentation, and Dr Morrison left the meeting.

6. Independent Review of the NI Agri-Food Industry – Kendall Report

The Chair led discussions on feedback received from Board Members from the *'Independent Strategic Review of the NI Agri-Food Sector'*, the Kendall Report.

It was agreed that the draft AFBI Corporate Plan 2022-2026 would be reviewed to ensure it takes cognisance of the outcomes of the report. The Chair and CEO agreed to meet to discuss the feedback from Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and Department for the Economy (DFE) to discuss the impact on AFBI and would provide an update at the next Board meeting in March.

**Chair/
CEO**

7. Governance Issues

7.1 Risk Management

7.1.1 Mr Montgomery advised that an updated Corporate Risk Register had been presented at the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) meeting held on 21 February 2022. Any changes to the risk scores had been highlighted and discussed including the reduction in the risk score of CR 5 – *'Failure to Recruit, Retain and Develop AFB's Workforce...'* primarily due to the successful recruitment of a number of permanent staff. Explanations for the changes to the risk scores from the Executive team were accepted.

Following the presentation of the Risk Register at the Board meeting, a member of the Board highlighted concerns at the reduction of the risk CR5 in relation to the Workforce as recruitment challenges still remained. After a discussion it was agreed that Risk CR5 would be discussed again at the next scheduled ARAC meeting.

In the meantime it was noted that staffing will continue to be monitored as a significant risk and further detail on staffing was included in the Executive Report, which would be covered later on in the meeting.

7.2 Fraud and Whistleblowing

7.2.1 Mr Montgomery referred to the *'Fraud and Whistleblowing Update – February 2022'* summary report.

He advised that there were no new Whistleblowing or Raising Concern cases since the last report as outlined in the *"Fraud and Whistleblowing Update – January 2022"* report.

8. Health & Safety

8.1 Health & Safety Update

Mrs Kelly outlined the key points in the *'Health and Safety Update February Board Report – February 2022'*.

The Health and Safety Executive NI has clarified that AFBI is no longer required to report COVID-19 cases as Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR) incidents.

A discussion around Control of Substances Hazardous for Health (COSHH) followed and it was clarified that COSHH training was provided, to appropriate staff, as part of the staff induction process on all AFBI sites. It was noted that Health and Safety Training is to be provided to new Board members.

Sec

9. Disability Action Plan

Mrs Kelly provided points of note within the '*Disability Action Plan 2021-2026*' paper.

The Chair made comment on existing accessibility in older properties to ensure access compliance with legislation.

After a discussion around older buildings adaptation, Mrs Kelly confirmed that the '*Disability Action Plan 2021-2026*' paper would be expanded in this area before the CEO and Chair sign off.

JK

10. Finance & Business

Mrs Kelly referred to the '*AFBI Board Finance Update Paper February 2022*'. It was noted that there was a short turn-around between the Executive Finance meeting and Board meetings and that Board members were comfortable that the Executive was reviewing meeting dates going forward to allow further time between the completion of the Management Accounts and Board Meetings. She also advised that an additional Board meeting would be provisionally arranged in March 2022 to facilitate the presentation of the 2020-21 Annual Report and Accounts for approval.

Sec

Mrs Kelly highlighted key messages within the 2021-22 Budget Update on the projected outturn to 31 March 2022. She drew attention to the approved January Monitoring Round budget and AFBI's latest 2021-22 forecast outturn position for AFBI's core work. The Board welcomed the anticipated outturn position.

Audit of the 2021-22 Annual Report and Accounts

Mrs Kelly provided a summary of progress regarding the NI Audit Office (NIAO) Audit of the 2020-21 Annual Report and Accounts. Given the planned NI Assembly election in May 2022, AFBI have been advised that the Annual Report and Accounts would need to be laid before the NI Assembly by Friday 25 March 2022 otherwise this will not take place until after the NI Executive resumes.

Mrs Kelly confirmed that the Non-DAERA Income Internal Audit Report had been presented at the ARAC meeting on 21 February 2022. She said that this Report along with management responses were being considered by NIAO. In addition the finance team were providing additional information to NIAO to allow them to complete the external audit. She said that both the AFBI and the NIAO teams were engaging on a regular basis to make every effort to meet the March 2022 deadline. She confirmed that if this deadline was to be met an additional ARAC would be required to present the Annual Report & Accounts for approval, as well as a one item agenda Extraordinary Board meeting at which the Annual Report & Accounts would be considered by the Board.

Before concluding the Finance Report, Mrs Kelly provided an update on royalties and advised that engagement was ongoing with the relevant parties regarding the royalty position.

LUNCH (12.45 – 1.10 pm)

Strategic Planning

11. Update on Production of AFBI Corporate Plan 2022-2026

Mr Montgomery presented the '*Corporate Business Planning Update – February 2022*' and highlighted key messages. He advised that after consultation with the Strategic Leadership Group (SLG), ongoing work on the four year plan continues including consultation with the SLG in relation to the proposed draft Vision and Purpose for the next corporate planning period.

Mr Montgomery highlighted some recent updates on the critical elements of the Corporate Plan with regard to the KPIs and strategic priorities, aligned with DAERA's outcomes and the COVID-

19 recovery plan. The Chair made comment around meaningful impact and change in agriculture within Northern Ireland with continued knowledge transfer to farming communities. Issues discussed included collaboration with key partners and a demonstration of scientific impact, quality and outcomes. It was agreed that a workshop would be arranged to focus on specific deliverables under themes relevant to industry.

GM

The Chair would meet with Mr Montgomery to discuss further the next steps with the Corporate Plan. The updated presentation would be made available on the Decision Time.

**Chair/
GM**

12. AFBI Draft Business Plan 2022-23

To note.

13. AFBI Science Strategy Update

The CEO provided an update on the AFBI Science Strategy. He advised that the Executive met in early February and further develop the AFBI Science Strategy but informed the Board that due to the number of other competing priorities and the need for alignment with the new Corporate Plan for the period 2022-26, the Science Strategy would unfortunately not be completed before 31 March 2022.

The CEO also advised that the AFBI Science Strategy would be a living document.

14. Executive Report including Brexit Update

The CEO highlighted key messages in the *“Executive Report – January 2022”* including the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) Hybrid Working Policy and Workforce Planning matters.

In response to a query regarding Internal Audit's *‘Review of Non-DAERA income’*, it was noted that the Executive would address any concerns around sampling and ensure that the recommendations raised in the report are addressed in a timely manner.

The Board congratulated the Head of the Research Support Office for progress in relation to the level of reporting provided to the Board.

15. Board Sub-Committees

15.1 Minutes of Board Sub-Committees

15.1.1 *Report of the Oversight and Governance Committee held on 4 February 2022*

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting held on 4 February 2022. The Committee Chair highlighted that queries on royalties were addressed earlier in the meeting.

15.1.2 *Report of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee held on 16 February 2022*

The Chair wanted to extend her thanks to the Secretariat for facilitating the meeting of 16 February 2022. She outlined the key points of the minutes and noted that the leadership team had focused on changing the culture and the working environment and that there was good progress in this area. She also outlined the challenges HR were currently facing with regards to recruitment. Succession planning was highlighted as being of high importance.

A discussion followed around the provision of Mental Health first aiders across all AFBI sites. The Board gave praise for the significant work undertaken with regards to Health and Wellbeing especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

15.1.3 *Report of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee held on 21 February 2022*

The Chair summarised key points of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee meeting held on 21 February 2022.

She reported that the internal audit was currently on course to complete the AFBI Internal Audit Plan 2021-2022 by year-end and that there had been significant progress in reducing outstanding

audit recommendations including some legacy issues. The Chair extended her thanks to Mr Montgomery for the excellent progress in this area.

16. Chair's Remarks

The Chair reported briefly on a number of recent meetings he had attended.

The Chair referred to the induction process for Board members and suggested that any feedback be provided to the Executive. Following a conversation around further face-to-face and hybrid meetings, the Chair recommended that during the month of April, recently appointed Board members may attend other Sub-Committee meetings as observers.

The Chair informed the Board that his appointment as the AFBI Board Chair had been extended for a further two years until March 2024. Board members and the CEO extended their congratulations on this news and looked forward to contributing under his stewardship.

17. Any Other Business

The Chair advised that Mrs Hanna would be acting Chair for the Finance and Business Strategy Committee for the March meeting.

18. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content the meeting had been effective.

19. Date of Next Meeting: 24 March 2022