



**Minutes of the Meeting  
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Board  
held via WebEx  
on Thursday 24 June 2021 at 10.00hrs**

**Present via WebEx  
Board Members**

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair  
Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Vice Chair  
Ms Kate Burns  
Dr Michelle Costello-Smith  
Ms Theresa Cullen  
Mrs Fiona Hanna  
Dr Richard Horton  
Ms Joan Houston  
Mr Richard Solomon  
Mrs Sharon Smyth

**AFBI Board Apprentice**  
Ms Morag Abernethy

**AFBI Executive:**

Mrs Josephine Kelly, Acting Chief Executive Officer  
Dr Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division  
Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Services Division  
Mr Pieter-Jan Schön, Director of Environment and Marine Sciences Division  
Mrs Hannah Francis, Acting Director of Finance & Human Resources

**In Attendance (via WebEx)**

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance  
Mrs Fiona Campbell, Head of Human Resources (Item 10)  
Ms Fiona McElroy, Head of Research Support (Item 6)  
Ms Margaret Anderson, Head of Corporate Affairs (Items 7 & 8)  
Mrs Lisa Donnelly, AFBI Secretariat  
Mrs Stephanie Robinson, AFBI Secretariat

**1. Welcome and Introduction** **ACTION**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.  
The Chair noted that Dr Magowan would be joining the meeting late.

**2. Apologies**

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer

**3. Conflict of Interests Declaration**

None declared.

**4. Draft Minutes of Previous Board Meeting held on 25 May 2021**

The draft minutes from the Board meeting held on 25 May 2021 were accepted as an accurate and fair representation of the meeting. However the Board requested that the section on the Complaints Policy and action sheet be updated to reflect the action undertaken by the Executive. **Sec**

**4.1 Action Sheet from Previous Board Meeting held on 25 May 2021**

The Board noted the progress against actions as per the Action Sheet.

**5. Brexit Update**

Brexit

Dr Douglas advised that AFBI Staff are continuing to work with DAERA through the requirements for testing under the Official Controls Regulations (OCR) following EU exit and implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol. He outlined that the Points of Entry/Border Control testing is still under review by DAERA regarding Animal Food Safety and Plant Health. An EU audit of OCR including border entry points is underway and Dr Douglas will liaise with DAERA to receive updates on this. **AD**

Dr Douglas noted there has been no further contact regarding Accreditation. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA), and Business Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) are taking the lead on this to ensure Northern Ireland laboratories are compliant with the requirements of OCR and the Northern Ireland Protocol. AFBI and DAERA will be consulted on any proposals arising from this.

## **6. Research Support Office (RSO) - Presentation**

Ms McElroy provided the Board with a presentation on the Research Support Office.

Ms McElroy and the RSO team are building on the AFBI / QUB Alliance and engaging with peers in Research Support across a variety of functions for mutual benefit. They have also developed a relationship with peers at University College Dublin (UCD) and are now considering further new joint initiatives and Professional Support knowledge sharing.

Ms McElroy highlighted over the coming months she would be working with colleagues in Human Resources to develop the best structure to fulfil all Research Support functions moving forward.

Ms McElroy advised that RSO would be commissioning a comprehensive Intellectual Property (IP) Audit which would inform the development of an Institutional Research Commercialisation Strategy.

Ms McElroy outlined that RSO will be working with colleagues on the development of a Funding Strategy to support the ambition of the AFBI Science Strategy 2030, which is an important stream of work.

The Board thanked Ms McElroy for her input into the Executive Report on a monthly basis and for her excellent presentation.

The Chair requested that he is included in the mailing list to receive the Funding Opportunities Newsletter.

**FMcE**

**BREAK (11.10 – 11.15AM)**

## 7. Governance Issues

### 7.1 Risk Management

#### 7.1.1 Report of New or Emerging Risks

Mr Montgomery advised the Board there were no new or emerging risks to the organisation.

### 7.2 Fraud

#### 7.2.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

Mr Montgomery advised the Board of one potential Fraud case which linked to an ongoing whistleblowing case. The Board sought assurance from the Executive in relation to the case and it was agreed that the Executive would provide a separate briefing to the Chair and Chairman of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee.

**JK/GM**

### 7.3 Whistleblowing

#### 7.3.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

Mr Montgomery advised the Board that there were no new cases and provided an update on the current ongoing cases. The Board asked the Executive to consider how cases were reported to the Board to ensure clarity over active and closed cases.

### 7.4 Complaints

#### 7.4.1 Reports of New or Emerging Complaints

Mr Montgomery advised the Board that no new corporate complaints had been notified.

#### 7.4.2 Complaints Policy

Ms Anderson presented the clarification paper provided to the Board on the "*Complaints Policy*".

Ms Anderson highlighted that with all AFBI policies, the Complaints Policy and Guidance are processes operated by, and applicable to,

AFBI staff, therefore no further changes were suggested to these documents. However, it was proposed that an additional section would be added to the Board Code of Conduct to clarify Board Members responsibilities in relation to Corporate Complaints. The Board confirmed that they were content with this approach.

## **8. Health & Safety**

### **8.1 Health & Safety Update**

The Board noted the Health & Safety Update and the significant amount of work that had been undertaken across AFBI to ensure compliance with the Northern Ireland Executive Covid-19 Regulations.

The Board discussed the importance of reporting of 'near misses' in identifying potential issues.

## **9. Finance & Business**

### **9.1 Finance Update Report**

Mrs Francis presented the "*Finance Update Report*".

She provided the Board with a summary of ongoing actions to reduce the impact of the £3.5m Resource Budget pressures for 2021/22:-

Mrs Francis noted that further detailed budget meetings were planned for July 2021 following production of Quarter 1 actuals at the end of June 2021 to ensure that October Monitoring Round Submission due at the end of July reflects up to date budgetary needs.

The Board discussed the letter which had been sent on behalf of the Chair to the Senior Sponsor in DAERA outlining the Board's concern over the potential impacts of the opening budget allocation. It was noted that while the Executive continued to liaise closely with DAERA Finance, a response to the correspondence was still awaited.

The Board discussed their continued concern and need for swift clarification from the outcome of the June monitoring bids to address any identified budget shortfall. It would also enable AFBI to take any corrective action required in relation to service delivery.

#### Annual Report and Accounts 2020/21

Mrs Francis updated the Board on the production of the 2020/21 Annual Report & Accounts advising that the draft statements had been presented to the ARAC meeting on 23 June 2021.

Following discussion Mrs Kelly provided the Board with assurance that the Covid-19 report would be presented at the Finance & Business Strategy Committee Meeting in September 2021.

**HF**

An update on the current Royalties position was noted.

### **LUNCH (12.50 – 1.25pm)**

#### **10. Human Resources Update**

Mrs Campbell delivered the *"AFBI HR Board Presentation"*. Reflecting on the previous year Mrs Campbell advised that Covid-19 brought AFBI many challenges and opportunities. A range of initiatives are being taken forward, including the focus on mental health & well-being. Successes in year included the recruitment of key senior posts and the launch of the first trawl for Scientific Officers in 10 years.

#### Performance Management

In relation to the Corporate KPI, Mrs Campbell advised that as at 18 June 2021 the completion rate of staff performance appraisals was 78% against the target of 85% for 30 June. She advised that EMT are working on measures to increase this percentage by the end of the month.

#### Staff Turnover

Mrs Campbell highlighted the issue of Staff turnover rates which had increased to 7.6% for 2020/21 from 6.7% and 4.5% in the previous 2 years.

The Board noted that AFBI has an ageing workforce with 25% of staff aged 55 and over, which is reflected in the leavers, with 41% of the total leavers having retired.

Mrs Campbell set out the actions being taken to mitigate staff turnover have been taken with strategic investment in various areas including internal systems to improve scientists' job quality, a new Research Support Office to support scientists and enable them to dedicate more time to science activities, and the introduction of a Strategic Leadership Programme.

#### Health & Wellbeing / Staff Engagement

Mrs Campbell advised that following the previous Covid staff survey, HR are finalising a short pulse survey to capture staff views on returning to the workplace. In addition, discussions are being held with NISRA regarding utilising the wider NICS staff engagement survey questions.

The Board discussed the importance of Human Resources, Recruitment and the need to ensure that staff Terms and Conditions matched the needs of the organisation.

The Board thanked Mrs Campbell for her informative presentation.

## **11. Executive Report**

Dr Douglas provided an update to the Board on the *"Animal Health Sciences Building project ongoing at VSD Stormont"*.

Dr Douglas advised that the design team and AFBI users are finalising the building room and post mortem facility requirements. There is currently a 6 month delay in planning and agreement of the final building design which has mainly been down to Covid impacts. He further advised that the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) Stage 3 is ongoing and due to complete later this year.

The Board noted the *"Executive Report"* for May 2021. Discussions focused on a number of key issues.

### Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (AERA)

Mrs Kelly advised that AFBI gave evidence to the AERA Committee on 10 June 2021 to contribute to the debate on the current Private Members' Bill on Climate Change. A detailed paper was prepared and submitted to the Committee in advance.

### Updates on Projects

Mrs Kelly noted that the procurement was due to commence for the LIMS (Laboratory Information Management Systems) project.

### Horizon Europe

The Board expressed disappointment that there had been no success from the proposals submitted by AFBI but noted the Executive's points around the positive learning from these applications.

### Business Continuity Plans

Mrs Kelly advised that the majority of Business Continuity Plans had now been updated and that she would provide a further update to the Board when this was completed.

The Board thanked the Executive for the comprehensive report.

## **12. Green Growth Update**

Mr Schön provided an update to the Board on the "Green Growth Capital Project" and highlighted that a list of capital items have been identified that the project is working towards.

Mr Schön noted progress had been made with the procurement identified and excess of 25 procurements would need to go through CPD.

Mr Schön confirmed he had attended meetings with DAERA Economist and Strategic Investment Board (SIB) regarding the development of the Outline Business Case.

Internally Mr Schön has also continued to meet with AFBI IT and Estates to ensure alignment and information are being gathered in terms of lead times to evaluate risk against individual items.



### **13. Beef Facilities Update**

Dr Magowan provided an update to the Board on AFBI's Beef Facilities. She advised that the Senior Responsible Owner (SRO) for the project, Mr Martin McKendry (CAFRE Director) had attended the June Oversight and Governance Committee meeting to brief the committee on progress. She added that a Project Board Meeting took place on 23 June 2021.

### **14. Board Sub-Committees**

#### 14.1 Minutes of Board Sub-Committees

#### 14.1.2 Report of the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting held on 15 June 2021

The Chair of the Committee provided a summary of the key points raised at the Oversight & Governance Committee meeting held on 15 June 2021.

The Chair noted that a comprehensive report had been provided by the Project Management Office.

A revised agreement with Queen's University Belfast (QUB) is currently being finalised.

The Business Case for legal fees in respect of Royalties was with DAERA Finance for their review and approval before forwarding to the Department of Finance.

An Audit of IP was currently being commissioned by CPD NI. The RSO will provide an update on this work at the next meeting.

#### 14.1.3 Report of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 23 June 2021

The Chair of the Committee provided a summary of the key points raised at the ARAC meeting held on 23 June 2021.

The Chair highlighted that progress was being made on reducing the number of Audit recommendations. The Chair also confirmed

that the DAERA Board had approved the AFBI Business Plan for 2021-22, which would now be forwarded to the Minister.

## **15. Chair's Remarks**

The Chair advised that he had a positive meeting with Professor Stuart Elborn, QUB.

The Chair suggested holding a showcase event in October 2021 which would give EMT and the new Non-Executive Directors an opportunity for their input.

The Chair noted that the recent joint AFBI/DAERA Board Meeting on 16 June 2021 with the Committee Chairs and Executive was very positive.

## **16. Any Other Business**

The Chair suggested the August Board Meeting should be held in the AFBI Boardroom dependant on Covid-19 restrictions.

### **16.1 Board Away Day**

Mrs Kelly confirmed that the Board Away Day scheduled for 29 June 2021 had been postponed. A new date would be scheduled for September 2021 at a venue yet to be confirmed.

**Sec**

## **17. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness**

The Board was content that the meeting had been effective.

There being no further business, the meeting ended at 15.20 hrs.

## **18. Date of Next Meeting**

The next AFBI Board meeting is scheduled to take place on Thursday 26 August 2021.