



**Minutes of the Meeting
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Board
held via WebEx
on Tuesday 25 May 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
Ms Margaret Anderson, Head of Corporate Affairs (Item 7)
Mrs Lisa Donnelly, AFBI Secretariat
Mrs Stephanie Robinson, AFBI Secretariat

1. Welcome and Introduction **ACTION**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer

3. Conflicts of Interest

None declared.

Following a query from the Board, Mrs Kelly confirmed that following the last Board meeting the requested Conflict of Interest Declarations for Senior Staff and Board Members had been duly provided to DAERA.

4. Draft Minutes of Previous Board Meeting held on 29 April 2021

The draft minutes from the Board meeting held on 29 April 2021 were accepted as an accurate and fair representation of the meeting.

4.1 Action Sheet from Previous Board Meeting held on 29 April 2021

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

5. Executive Report Incorporating Brexit Update

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

Brexit

Dr Douglas advised that AFBI staff are continuing to meet with DAERA to work through the requirements for testing under the Official Controls Regulations (OCR) following EU exit and implementation of the NI Protocol. Work is also ongoing with DAERA in respect of accreditation requirements for testing supporting OCR and it is anticipated that a way forward may become clearer over the next few months.

Responding to a query from the Board in relation to National Reference Laboratories, Dr Douglas advised that Memorandum of Understanding are in place or well advanced with EU based Laboratories to meet AFBI requirements.

Workforce Planning & Recruitment Activity

The Board discussed the current challenges in relation to the levels of recruitment required, the levels of agency workers and the business risks to AFBI delivering on its key objectives and science projects. The Executive advised that they are continuing to meet regarding the facilitation of efficient and effective recruitment to address these staffing issues. Following discussion of the challenges it was agreed that a trend analysis of agency staff levels and the use of fixed term contracts would be provided to allow the Board to fully understand the risk profile around the issues.

The Board further discussed the importance of performance reviews and also the need to ensure that AFBI delivers on the Key Performance Indicator (KPI) around staff performance reviews in the Business Plan for 2021-22.

It was agreed that Mrs Fiona Campbell, Head of Human Resources, would be invited to attend the June Board meeting to provide an update on the issues raised and to provide further details on the actions being undertaken.

Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (AERA)

Mrs Kelly advised that AFBI had been invited to attend the Committee for Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (AERA) on 10 June 2021 with regards to the Climate Change Bill.

Beef Facilities Project

The Executive provided an update in relation to the Beef Facilities Project. The Board noted that the Minister had announced approval for commencement of the Project relating to the development of the beef facilities research platform at AFBI and facilities at CAFRE. These DAERA led investments formed part of a Business Case for £17m previously approved by the Department of Finance.

The Board discussed the importance of the Project, noting the concerns around the current AFBI Beef Facilities and requested that an invitation be extended to the Senior Responsible Officer (SRO) for the project Mr McKendry (CAFRE) to attend the next Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting in June 2021.

The Board also requested an update on the project at the June Board Meeting.

BREAK (11.35 - 11.45 AM)

6. Green Growth/Soils Project

Mr Schön provided the Board with an update in relation to the Green Growth Capital investment. He advised that there was an outline contract with the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) to assist in the development of the Business Cases. He advised that the scope of the capital investment remained at £7.75m.

He outlined that discussions have taken place with the DAERA Economists in relation to the business case and further meetings will be scheduled with SIB and DAERA Finance. He also highlighted that he represents AFBI on the DAERA Green Growth and Climate Action Plan Senior Leadership Group. The next meeting is scheduled for the end of June 2021 at which he will provide an update on progress on the capital investment project.

The Board welcomed the update and the initiative as it represents AFBI being involved in influencing the future direction of policy. They stressed the need to capture the value achieved from the capital investment so that this can be clearly demonstrated.

Further to a very informative update, at a previous Board meeting from Tracy Teague, CEO of NIEA on the Green Growth initiative, the Board asked if an invite could be extended to Norman Fulton, Deputy Secretary, DAERA Food and Framing Division for the September Board meeting so that Board could be informed of the important work of this Division.

Mr Schön provided the Board with a brief update on the Soil Nutrient Project noting that work is progressing and the business case is scheduled to be considered by the DAERA Case Work Committee and will be reviewed at the end of June. He further outlined that this hugely significant project would commence with a pilot study of 3,000 sample fields. He added that he was working closely with HR in relation to progressing the recruitments needed for this Project.

The Board thanked Mr Schön for the update.

7. Governance Issues

7.1 Risk Management

7.1.1 Reports 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. Mr Montgomery noted that he would update the Board at the appropriate juncture.

7.3 Whistleblowing

In addition to the one case referred to in his update on Fraud, Mr Montgomery advised the Board of a further emerging Whistleblowing case which was in the early stages of investigation. Mr Montgomery noted that he would update the Board at the appropriate juncture.

7.4 Complaints

7.4.1 Reports of New or Emerging Complaints

Mr Montgomery advised the Board there were no new corporate complaints, which had been notified.

7.4.2 Complaints Policy

Ms Anderson presented the updated "*Complaints Policy*" to the Board. She highlighted that the review of the Policy had confirmed that the policy was fit for purpose and in line with best practice. However some additional clarity has been included within the staff guidance on the handling of complaints.

The Board queried the process for complaints received by a Board Member it was agreed that the Executive would consider how this would be addressed.

8. Health & Safety

8.1 Health & Safety Update

The Board noted the Health & Safety Update and the significant amount of work that had been carried out across the Institute ensuring compliance with the Northern Ireland Executive COVID – 19 Regulations.

9. Finance & Business

9.1 Finance Update Report

Mrs Francis presented the "*Finance Update Report*" to the Board on the final opening budget 2021/22 as issued by DAERA and the impact on AFBI's activities and the final June monitoring submission.

The Board discussed the letter which had been sent on behalf of the Chair to the Senior Sponsor in DAERA outlining the Board's concerns 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. However it was noted that the June Monitoring Round process had not yet concluded. 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 to enable AFBI to take any corrective action required in relation to service delivery.

Mrs Francis advised that a meeting is scheduled on 26 May 2021 between AFBI Finance and DAERA Finance. It was agreed that Mrs Francis would report back to the Chair following this meeting.

HF

Annual Report & Accounts

Mrs Francis outlined that work was progressing in relation to the production of the 2020/21 Annual Report & Accounts. These are to be presented in draft to the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee meeting on 23 June 2021 with the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) scheduled to commence their audit in August/September 2021.

Covid-19 Financial Impact

Finance provided a 2020/21 Covid-19 Financial Impact paper to May's Finance & Business Strategy Committee Meeting.

Finance will provide the final 2020/21 Covid-19 Financial Impact paper to the September Finance & Business Strategy Committee Meeting and then to the Board.

HF

Financial Costing

Mrs Francis noted the 2019/20 AWP Outturn was issued to DAERA on 2 November 2020. A detailed review was then carried out with AFBI branches, investigating variances against budget on a number of lines. A meeting was held between AFBI Finance and DAERA on 23 March to discuss variance explanations. DAERA have now confirmed they are content that all issues have been addressed.

The 2021/22 AWP Budget was submitted to DAERA on 29 January. On 2 March DAERA submitted a number of actions to be followed up by AFBI, including new lines to be costed, amendments to existing lines and queries on the costs submitted. These have now been addressed by the costing team and a full response including the final 2021/22 AWP costing was provided to DAERA on 23 April. A follow up meeting is arranged between AFBI and DAERA for early June to discuss and agree the cost of the 2021/22 AWP science programme.

10. Updates on Alliances – Professor Nigel Scollan – Queen’s University Belfast (QUB)

Professor Scollan provided the Board with a presentation on the AFBI /QUB Strategic Alliance

He outlined the “Strategic Overviews & Ambitions” of the Alliance within the areas of Transformation of Agriculture, Environment and Food Systems. Professor Scollan set out the governance structure in place for the Alliance and the Key Performance Indicators.

The Board thanked Professor Scollan for his presentation.

The Board noted that EMT plans to have workshop with QUB over the summer to discuss the strategic direction of the alliance.

EM

11. Board Sub-Committees

11.1 Minutes of Board Sub-Committees

11.1.2 Report of the Finance & Business Strategy Committee held on 19 May 2021

The Chair of the Committee provided a summary of the key points raised at the Finance & Business Strategy Committee meeting held on 19 May 2021.

11.1.3 Report of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee held on 20 May 2021

The Chair of the Committee provided a summary of the key points raised at the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee meeting held on 20 May 2021.

11.1.4 Report of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee held on 20 April 2021

The Board noted the draft Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Minutes.

12. Chair's Remarks

The Chair advised that he had a positive meetings with Professor Stuart Elborn, Queen's University Belfast (QUB), Mr Norman Fulton DAERA, Mrs Fiona McCandless, DAERA and Mr Robert Huey DAERA.

13. Any Other Business

Mrs Kelly confirmed the Board Away Day was currently planned for 29 June 2021 in AFBI Headquarters.

14. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content that the meeting had been effective.

There being no further business the meeting ended at 15.15 hrs.

15. Date of Next Meeting

The next AFBI Board meeting is scheduled to take place on Thursday 24 June 2021 via WebEx.