

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)
Board Meeting held via WebEx
on Thursday 25 November at 10.00hrs**

Present

Board Members

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

AFBI Board Apprentice

Mr Nigel Morris

AFBI Executive:

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer
Mrs Josephine Kelly, Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs Division
Dr 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

In Attendance

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance
Ms Margaret Anderson, Head of Corporate Affairs (Item 13)
Mrs Stephanie Robinson, AFBI Secretariat
Mrs Bronagh McCotter, AFBI Secretariat

1. Welcome and Introduction

ACTION

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting. It was noted that there was an urgent matter that the Chair and Mrs Kelly had to deal with and as a result the running order of the meeting would be revised to accommodate this. The Vice Chair chaired the Board Meeting for the items that the Chair was absent from the meeting in dealing with this matter.

The Chair and Mrs Kelly were absent from the Board meeting for items 8. Beef Facilities Update, 9. Green Growth, 11. Executive Report including Brexit Update and the start of 13. Estates Strategy Update.

2. Apologies

None

3. Conflict of Interests Declaration

None declared.

4. Draft Minutes of Previous Board Meeting held on 28 October 2021.

The draft minutes from the Board meeting held on 28 October 2021 were accepted as an accurate and fair representation of the meeting.

4.1 Action Sheet from Previous Board Meeting held on 28 October 2021

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

Mrs Kelly reported that the legal advice had been commissioned in relation to a query raised regarding the Directed Research Fund (DRF) and an update would be provided at the Finance and Business Strategy Committee (F&BSC) meeting on 2 December 2021. Mrs Kelly would provide a further update at the January Board Meeting.

JK

5. Governance Issues

5.1 Risk Management

5.1.1 Reports of New or Emerging Risks

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

5.1.2 Update on Refresh of Risk Register

Mr Montgomery provided an update on AFBI's Risk Management position as outlined in the "*Risk Management Update – Refresh of Corporate Risk Register*" paper which informed the Board of the key risks identified by the Executive.

Mr Montgomery outlined that the Risk Review group was scheduled to meet to further populate the mitigating actions and an updated Corporate Risk Register (CRR) would be brought to the next Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) meeting.

GM

The Board welcomed the refresh of the Risk Register and discussed other potential risk areas for inclusion. It was agreed that Mr Montgomery would raise the points discussed at the Risk Review Group for consideration.

5.2 Fraud and Whistleblowing

5.2.1 *Reports of New or Ongoing Cases*

Mr Montgomery reported that there were no new cases of fraud since the summary report provided to the Board in October 2021.

Mr Montgomery advised that there was one active case of whistleblowing brought forward from Quarter 4 of 2020/21. In the year to date, three Whistleblowing cases had been raised, investigated and closed out.

5.3 Complaints

5.3.1 *Reports of New or Emerging Complaints*

Mr Montgomery reported that there had been no complaints since the summary report provided to the Board in October 2021.

The Board agreed that going forward the complaints dashboard would be included in the Executive Report, rather than as a separate agenda item.

GM

In terms of actions arising from the investigation of a complaint, it was noted that testing will be undertaken to ensure that calls

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received through the main switch board and 'hunt group' was functioning effectively.

6. Health & Safety

6.1 Health and Safety – Update

The Board noted the "*Health and Safety Update Report*". Mrs Kelly provided an update on a potential Covid-19 cluster at an AFBI site which was reported to the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) and was awaiting a response. Mrs Kelly advised she would keep the Board updated.

JK

Mrs Kelly advised that AFBI continued to follow government guidance relating to Covid-19 and would follow-up on the availability of Covid-19 lateral flow test kits within the work place to encourage staff to take regular testing before entering the work environment.

JK

The Board congratulated the Health & Safety team on the report provided.

7. Update on Research Vessel

Mr Schön provided a presentation and overview of the design specification of the new marine research vessel. He highlighted that the aim was to have a multi-purpose vessel and given the current emphasis on sustainability issues the design now includes a hybrid engine.

The Board enquired about maintenance costs. Mr Schön also outlined that there was significant battery capacity for the vessel and future development in battery technology is likely to extend the existing life span of the hybrid engine batteries.

Mr Schön flagged the likelihood of increasing costs of materials, in particular the increase in price of steel and that the outline business case would have to be updated when these costs were known.

BREAK (11.15 – 11.25am)

8. Beef Facilities

Dr Magowan provided an update on the construction of new beef facilities at the AFBI Hillsborough site. Following a Project Board meeting, a decision was made to proceed with the surfacing of the laneway to the new facilities. She also confirmed that demolition of the old facilities was now complete and it is anticipated that the new facilities would be completed during 2023-24.

9. Green Growth

Mr Schön advised that the Green Growth Business Case would be submitted to DAERA within the next few days and pending sign off by the Department of Finance (DoF), procurement continues to be progressed with Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) as far as possible at this stage.

It was also noted that AFBI had already undertaken groundwork in relation to a number of areas such as carbon capture and sustainability which puts AFBI in a strong position to help inform stakeholders.

The Board asked for an update on the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme and enquired about the proposed levels of uptake of participation of farmers in the scheme. Mr Schön advised that there would be a pilot phase initially with a wider roll out of the scheme in 2022-23.

10. Finance & Business

10.1 Finance Update Report

Mrs Kelly presented the "*Finance Update Report*" and highlighted the following:

- AFBI were awaiting formal response from DAERA on the outcome of the January Monitoring Round submission in October;
- Income has decreased by £173k with an associated reduction in programme spend of £132k;
- The overall budget variance based on the latest budget information against the January Monitoring request was forecast to be an operational underspend of £65k.

The Board discussed the level of detail provided on the year to date position and asked finance to review for future reports. Mrs Kelly advised that more detailed reports would be provided to the next Finance and Business Strategy Committee which was scheduled for 2 December 2021.

Dr McDowell outlined that considerable work had been undertaken by Finance and also by the Executive Management Team in reviewing the financial position.

Mrs Kelly referred to the commissioning of the Assigned Work Programme (AWP) for 2022-23. She said that AFBI was waiting final details of the 2022-23 AWP from DAERA to allow AFBI to start costing the programme as well projecting the budget requirements for the 2022/23 financial year. She added that delays in finalising the programme will impact the time lines for costing of the programme.

Mrs Kelly informed the Board that a letter had been issued to the inventors with regards to the royalty position and it was agreed that this would be discussed further at the January Board meeting.

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10.2 Annual Report and Accounts 2020/21 and NIAO Report to those Charged with Governance 2020/21

Mrs Kelly advised that work was ongoing with the external tax advisor and anticipated that this would be completed shortly. Following this and completion of Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) audit, the accounts would be presented to ARAC prior to being presented to the Board for approval.

11. Executive Report including Brexit Update

Dr McDowell presented the "*Executive Report to the Board 25 November 2021*" and highlighted a number of key points, including the following:

- A paper on workforce planning issues will be presented at the Organisational Development and Human Resources (ODHR) Committee on 8 December 2021. The Executive are continuing to meet to approve posts for recruitment on a priority basis.
- Discussion with DAERA in relation to test requirements arising from the implementation of the NI Protocol continue.

- The revised DRF policy has been agreed between DAERA and AFBI and the draft Annual DRF report for the Directed Research Fund (DRF) 2020-21 will shortly be submitted to DAERA.
- Following a recent incident of water damage to a building on the VSD Stormont site it was agreed that the Executive will acknowledge staff dedication in dealing with the incident. A letter will also be provided to DAERA regarding the matter.

Dr Douglas provided an update on the current Avian Flu situation and it was noted that there were a significant numbers of incidents of this highly pathogenic strain across Europe and that the industry was on high alert.

LUNCH

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

Mr Montgomery gave a presentation on the work to date on the production of the draft AFBI Corporate Plan 2022-2026. He advised this was a work in progress and the purpose of today's presentation was to seek Board input to the Executive's early considerations.

Mr Montgomery outlined the strategic planning context, including links to the Programme for Government, the Executive's Covid recovery plan and DAERA's strategic priorities. He further outlined the proposed five draft Strategic Priorities and the key actions for their delivery. The Board confirmed that they were content with the approach being taken. It was noted that a further update was planned for the Board meeting in January.

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13. Estates Strategy Update

The Board welcomed Ms Anderson to the meeting.

Ms Anderson gave a presentation on progress of the AFBI Estates Strategy.

Ms Anderson highlighted that the AFBI Estates Strategy encompassed a high levelled Estates Strategy Principles document, and a strategic plan for each site. She outlined that these would be implemented through site specific action plans.

She confirmed that the principles document would be discussed with EMT in December 2021 and that the Estates Strategy remain on track for submission to the Board for approval by March 2022.

Ms Anderson was commended for her work to date on the AFBI Estates Strategy. It was recognised that additional support would be required in order to progress the strategy. The Board will be updated in due course. Mrs Kelly thanked Ms Anderson and the Estates team for all their work.

MA

Dr McDowell also highlighted the potential impact of budget pressures and outlined the key priorities in respect of the AFBI Estate. It was also noted that a number of workshops and discussions between DAERA and AFBI on future estate development have taken place over the last 2-3 years.

14. Board Sub-Committees

14.1 Minutes of Board Sub-Committees

14.1.1 *Report of Oversight and Governance Committee held on 8 October 2021*

The Board noted the draft minutes from the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting held on 8 October 2021.

14.1.2 *Report of the Finance and Business Strategy Committee held on 29 September 2021*

The Board noted the draft minutes from the Finance and Business Committee Meeting held on 29 September 2021 and that a verbal update was provided at the October Board meeting. The Committee Chair highlighted the shortfall in the budget.

15. Chair's Remarks

The Chair reported briefly on a number of recent meetings and events he attended. These included the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA) Annual Dinner event on "*Collaboration key to unlocking industry potential and addressing climate change*". The Chair also updated on the City deals.

The Chair conveyed that the newly appointed Board Members would

be joining the Board Workshop on 17 December 2021.

16. Draft Agenda for Board Workshop on 17 December 2021

The draft agenda for the Board Workshop on 17 December was discussed and agreed.

It was agreed that Mr Montgomery would undertake a formal induction on 14 December 2021 for new Board Members and to include policy documents in the induction packs.

GM

17. Any Other Business

The Board noted AFBI's press release in relation to a newly appointed Board Member following a media enquiry to DAERA and the AFBI Chair.

18. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content the meeting had been effective.

19. Date of Next Meeting

Thursday 27 January 2022