

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)
Board Meeting held in Foyer Conference Room, AFBI Newforge
on Tuesday 4 July 2023 at 10.00hrs**

Board Members

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

Boardroom Apprentice

Mr Jonathan Craig

AFBI Executive:

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer
Prof 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
Mr Ivor Johnston, Interim Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs Division

In Attendance

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance
Dr Eileen Stewart, Head of Estate Management & Development Branch (Item 11)
Dr Adrian Allen, Principal Scientific Officer, Bacteriology Branch (Item 13)
Dr David McCleery, Science Strategy Lead (Item 14)
Mr James Adams, AFBI Secretariat

Visitors

Ms Cheryl Robinson, Business Consultancy Service (BCS) (Item 5)
Ms Martina McKeivitt, Business Consultancy Service (BCS) (Observer)
Mrs Alison Caldwell, Director of DAERA Estate Transformation (Item 11)
Mr Gerry Millar, Strategic Investment Board (SIB) (Item 11)

1. Welcome and Introduction

ACTION

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting, in particular Ms Robinson and Ms McKeivitt from BSC who are undertaking the external review of AFBI Board effectiveness.

The Chair also took the opportunity to congratulate AFBI Board Member, Mr Bill Montgomery on his award of an OBE in the King's Birthday Honours for services to the NI Economy.

2. Apologies

Apologies were received on behalf of the Board Members, Mr Alan Moore, Prof Sally Shortall and Mr Tom Tynan.

3. Conflicts of Interest Declaration

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

4. Draft Minutes of Board Meeting held on 22 May 2023

The draft minutes of the Board Meeting held on 22 May 2023 were accepted as an accurate and fair representation of the meeting.

4.1 Action Sheet from Board Meeting held on 22 May 2023

The Board noted that the actions as per the Action Sheet had been completed or formed part of the agenda apart from the following:

The Chair's initial stakeholder map had been circulated for comments and he requested that this be added to the agenda for the next Board meeting for discussion.

Sec

5. Business Consultancy Services (BCS)

5.1 External Review of AFBI Board Effectiveness

The Board noted the AFBI Board Effectiveness Proposal paper presented by BCS and Ms Robinson provided the Board with an overview in relation to their review.

She outlined the Terms of Reference, scope, project structure, approach being undertaken and the progress to date. Key next steps include continued analysis of survey results, complete Board member, Executive and Departmental consultations and complete a desktop review of Board documentation.

The Chair thanked Ms Robinson for the presentation and encouraged all Board members to engage in the very useful exercise. It was noted that BCS will attend the September meeting of the AFBI Board to present their draft findings and action plan.

BCS

6. Board Sub-Committees

6.1 Report of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meetings held on the 15 May 2023 and 29 June 2023

The Board noted the final minutes of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee meeting held on 15 May 2023 which had been reported on at the May 2023 Board meeting.

Mr Wright gave a verbal update on the Committee meeting held on 29 June 2023. He summarised discussions on a number of Internal Audit Reports and advised that an overall '*Satisfactory*' annual assurance had been received from Internal audit for 2022-23.

Mr Wright, in response to a query from the Chair, advised that the Committee had received an assurance from the Executive that they are proactively managing the implementation of high priority audit recommendations and the Committee retains a strong focus on this through the audit recommendations report.

6.2 Report of the Organisational Development & Human Resources Committee held on 17 May 2023

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Organisational Development & Human Resources Committee meeting held on 17 May 2023 previously reported on at the May 2023 Board meeting.

6.3 Report of the Finance & Business Strategy Committee held on 23 May 2023

The Board noted that the major items from the Finance & Business Strategy Committee meeting held on 23 May 2023 will be covered on today's agenda.

6.4 Report of the Science Strategy Committee held on 19 June 2023

Ms Burns provided a verbal update on the discussions at the Science Strategy Committee meeting held on 19 June 2023 including the scope of science work being delivered, delivery of major science projects and the Evidence & Innovation process and metrics. The concept of establishing an external science advisory group was also discussed and the Executive will develop proposals in due course.

A general discussion ensued around the positioning of AFBI in terms of core research and development work and the need for the benefits of external collaboration to be evaluated. It was felt that further clarity will be provided through the work underway on the AFBI Science Strategy which was included on today's agenda.

6.5 Report of the Oversight & Governance Committee Meeting held on 20 June 2023

Committee members summarised a number of key discussions at the recent Oversight & Governance Committee Meeting held on 20 June 2023 and commented on the excellent strategic reports and assurances provided around several ongoing projects.

The Chair requested that he be kept informed if there is any delay in the DAERA consideration of the Green Growth business case.

7. Governance Issues

7.1 Risk Management

7.1.1 *Reports of New or Emerging Risks*

There were no new or emerging risks to report.

7.1.2 *Quarterly Risk Management Update*

Mr Montgomery presented the Risk Management Update paper which summarised the key changes to the Corporate Risk Register (CRR) following the meeting of the Risk Review Group (RRG) on 7 June 2023.

He summarise the key changes including the removal of CR10 in relation to royalty income following conclusion of the process and receipt of monies. Scoring changes reflected that 4 Corporate Risks have been attributed with a 'Red' residual risk score.

The CEO commented that the number of 'Red' risks reflected the overall pressures that AFBI are facing including that arising from the significant level of change occurring within the organisation.

A discussion ensued on a number of topics highlighted in the CRR including financial, HR, systems and accommodation issues. The Board agreed to have a detailed review of the CRR at the next Board meeting in order to provide clarity on the control measures in place and additional actions being undertaken.

Exec

7.2 Fraud and Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns

7.2.1 *Reports of new or Ongoing Cases*

Mr Montgomery reported that there were no new cases of Fraud or Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns since the last report to the Board. The Board noted the position in relation to two ongoing cases of Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns which are nearing conclusion.

A query was raised on how to determine when a concern raised should be taken forward through normal business processes and when Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns procedures should be enacted. Mr Montgomery stated that while there is guidance in relation to this, there is a degree of subjectivity and individual interpretation. However, staff are encouraged to be proactive and a recent internal campaign emphasised the message of '*If in doubt, Speak Out*' and AFBI guidance signposts staff to both internal and external points of contact should they wish to raise a concern.

Exec

The Board asked for an assurance at the next meeting that this message is being effectively disseminated throughout AFBI.

8. Health & Safety

8.1 Health & Safety Update

Mr Johnston informed the Board of one incident that was Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR) reportable.

In terms of recruitment in Health, Safety and Compliance Branch it was noted that the final position to be filled for a Health and Safety Officer had just been advertised.

8.2 Mandatory Training Report

Mr Johnston presented a paper on 'Corporate Mandatory Training'. It was noted that training records are currently captured by a range of IT systems and training platforms which are used by AFBI. The paper detailed current arrangements as well as how AFBI plans to enhance the reporting and recording of mandatory training undertaken.

He outlined the planned next steps which include investigating the viability of using an existing Quality Assurance software package to record training which is not currently captured electronically and in longer term, taking this forward through the Finance & Business Management System project.

9. Finance & Business

9.1 Finance Update Report

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

2023-24 Budget Update

The challenging budget situation was noted and in particular the high dependency on the approval of funding for EU Exit and related work from the Brexit Operational Readiness (BOR) business case to achieving a balanced budget position. It was also noted that

discussions with DAERA on the affordability of some elements of the Assigned Work Programme was ongoing. Assuming the funding for the BOR and EU Exit work was forthcoming, AFBI is currently forecasting it will deliver a balanced 2023-24 budget.

The First Monitoring Round had been commissioned by DAERA and the position was summarised by Mr Johnston. It was also clarified that given the likely timeframe for procurement of capital items under the Green Growth initiative, which is still subject to business case approval, the associated R&D funding allocated for 2023-24 has been surrendered.

The Board noted that pressures remain on the Resource Budget 2023-24 but congratulated the Executive on the current positive position. The Chair also emphasised that given the wider public sector budget position, it is important to operate with the mindset of exploring any additional opportunities for savings in order to ensure budget allocations are utilised in the most efficient manner possible. The Executive whiling assuring Board that it continues to seek opportunities to achieve efficiencies, noted the significant pressures existing across the organisation.

9.2 Draft Annual Report and Accounts 2022-23

The Board noted the pre-audited draft *'Annual Report and Accounts 2022-23'* which had been presented to the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee on 29 June 2023. AFBI Internal Audit have provided a valuable checklist following their review of audit preparedness and it is hoped that this will expedite the external audit.

Mr Johnston asked Board members to confirm that they were comfortable with their disclosures under the *'Remuneration & Staff Report'* section of the draft *'Annual Report and Accounts 2022-23'* and Board members confirmed they were content.

10. Executive Report

The CEO presented the Executive Report and highlighted a number of points including the following:

- Staff flyers have been issued which summarise the actions being taken forward from the Staff Engagement Survey.

- An 'AFBI Values' survey has been launched to seek staff input to a new set of AFBI values going forward.
- A very successful Grass Open Day at AFBI Loughgall which had attracted a high level of stakeholder attendance.

11. DAERA/AFBI Estate Strategy

The CEO welcomed Mrs Caldwell, Mr Millar and Dr Stewart to the meeting who will be providing the Board with an update on the Strategic Review of the AFBI Occupied Land and Property Holdings. This review is being taken forward by DAERA Estate Transformation Division (ETD), in conjunction with AFBI and SIB.

Mrs Caldwell provided some background on the establishment of the DAERA ETD to look at the long-term strategy for the DAERA Estate of which AFBI is a major component. Part of Stage 1 of the process involved looking at the AFBI Estate on a standalone basis and a Project Team and Board was established to take this forward.

Mr Millar then summarised the main findings of the report presented at today's meeting entitled '*Strategic Review of AFBI Estate - Draft Emergent Strategy Proposals*'. It was noted that the report, subject to minor drafting points, had been approved by the Project Board in March 2023 and subsequently presented to the DAERA Departmental Board at its meeting in May 2023.

In parallel, the Review Team has been working closely with CPD Construction Division to agree the scope/specification for commissioning of contractors to stress test the emerging Estate Strategy proposals.

Following a discussion on aspects of the Report and its recommendations, the Board was content to support the general direction of travel.

12. Food Research Branch

Prof. Magowan presented a paper in relation to the proposed cessation of food quality research and the merger of Food Research Branch (FRB) staff into the Agri-Environment Branch (AEB). Prof Magowan explained that following consultation, it was felt that the scientific expertise and capability would best align with the work of

AEB and that the two groups were currently located in adjacent facilities. It was noted that attracting funding for work on food quality issues had been challenging in recent times and that the proposed change would align with DAERA's priority in the area of agri-food sustainability.

It was noted that food safety work including chemical and microbiological surveillance and research activities were not affected and would continue to operate within Veterinary Sciences Division. It was also noted that there were other science organisations operating in the area of food quality and which industry.

Following discussion and confirmation that it was not to the detriment of any staff involved, the Board was content to approve this proposal.

13. Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) Genomics Presentation

The CEO introduced Dr Allen who was providing the Board with a presentation on bovine Tuberculosis (TB). In particular, the presentation will focus how genome sequencing of *Mycobacterium bovis* (*M. bovis*), the bacteria that causes bTB infection, has been used to inform the understanding of the epidemiology of the infection in cattle and badgers.

Dr Allen explained that the huge advances in genomic sequencing technology over the last twenty years now allows the complete sequencing of the genetic makeup of organisms at a modest cost. It was noted however that substantial amounts of data are generated which requires significant computing capacity and highly specialised expertise to analyse.

In relation to *M. bovis*, analysis of the data has enabled Dr Allen and colleagues to gain a detailed understanding of cross-species transition dynamics within the area studied. Dr Allen also illustrated how genome sequencing can provide higher resolution identification of strains and how this could aid disease tracing.

The Chair thanked Dr Allen for his presentation and commended him on the quality and excellence of the work. Board members echoed the Chair's comments.

14. AFBI Science Strategy Update

Dr McCleery provided the Board with a presentation regarding developing the AFBI Science Strategy to 2030 following his recent uptake of the temporary role of Science Strategy Lead.

He highlighted the various steps in relation to strategy development and those which are had previously been undertaken as part of the work to develop AFBI's Corporate Plan 2023-27. He also illustrated the various inputs that will aid the strategy formation and highlighted the establishment of a cross-divisional working group.

In covering the key next steps and assessing the amount of work requiring to be completed, Dr McCleery asked for a revised timeline of 31 December 2023 for completion of the strategy. The Board recognised the challenging timeframe and after a discussion agreed the revised target but requested a progress update to be provided at the September 2023 Board meeting.

Exec

The Chair thanked Dr McCleery for his update and noted that the AFBI Science Strategy was vital in clarifying the delivery of scientific outputs and impacts. He also acknowledged that it would provide greater focus on areas of science whilst taking cognisance of any resource or facility limitations.

15. Chair's Remarks

The Chair provide the Board with an update on recent meetings with DAERA officials. It was also noted that a joint DAERA/AFBI Board meeting is planned for later in the year.

The Chair will update members who were unable to attend today's meeting and will communicate with the Board should any significant matters arise over the summer period.

16. Any Other Business

16.1 DAERA Consultation on Northern Ireland's 2030 & 2040 Emissions Reduction Targets

In response to a question from the Board, the CEO advised that, while AFBI is not expected to respond directly to the DAERA Consultation

on Northern Ireland's 2030 & 2040 Emissions Reduction Targets, it can provide scientific input if required.

17. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content the meeting had been effective.

18. Date of Next Meeting

The next AFBI Board Meeting will be held on Thursday 14 September 2023.