

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)
Board Meeting held in F54 Meeting Room, AFBI Newforge
on Thursday 6 March 2025 at 10.00hrs**

Board Members

Prof Grace Mulcahy, Chair
Mr Martyn Blair
Mrs Daphne Johnston
Mr Tim McClelland
Mr Bill Montgomery

Mr Alan Moore
Ms Therese Rafferty
Mr Tom Tynan
Mr Tom Wright

AFBI Executive

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer
Prof Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division (SAFSD)
Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division (VSD)
Ms Nuala McAuley, Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs Division (FCAD)
Mr Pieter-Jan Schön, Director of Environment and Marine Sciences Division

In Attendance

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance
Dr Paul Caskie, Head of Economics and Research Branch (Item 10)
Dr Ziping Wu, Economics and Research Branch (Item 10)
Mrs Stephanie Robinson, AFBI Secretariat

Visitors

Ms Tracey Teague, Deputy Secretary, Climate Change, Science and Innovation Group (Item 5)
Dr Alistair Carson, Chief Scientific Adviser (Item 5)

1. Welcome and Introduction

ACTION

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

There were no apologies to record.

3. Conflicts of Interest Declaration

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

4. Draft Minutes of AFBI Board Meeting held on 6 February 2025

The draft minutes of the Board Meeting held on 6 February 2025 were accepted as accurate and a fair representation of the meeting.

4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 6 February 2025

The Board noted that the actions as per the Action Sheet had been completed or formed part of the agenda.

5. Update on DAERA Draft Science Commissioning Policy

The Chair welcomed Ms Tracey Teague and Dr Alistair Carson to the meeting for a discussion on developing the new DAERA Science Strategy, including Science Commissioning.

Ms Teague outlined the background of the Science Transformation Programme and the long-term journey and the need to work together for full roll-out of the programme.

Dr Carson provided an overview of DAERA's Ministerial priorities and outlined that Science and Innovation is key to addressing these. He welcomed that the draft AFBI Science Strategy shows good alignment to DAERA's priorities.

Dr Carson highlighted the Minister's support for science and the significant investment in AFBI facilities and infrastructure, including the Animal Health Sciences Building, the replacement research vessel and the ISLAND (laboratory information management system) project.

Dr Carson referred to the governance and oversight of the science strategy and noted that scientists would play an important role in informing strategic direction which would be headed by a high-level Science Oversight Group with a Research & Development Committee and Monitoring & Surveillance Science Committee. Dr Carson noted that stakeholder engagement would also form part of the governance and oversight aspects.

There was discussion on the potential impacts of open commissioning. It was agreed that further discussion was necessary between DAERA and AFBI on the process given the potential impacts.

Dr Carson outlined the categorisation process for DAERA science commissions. A Task and Finish Group has been set up to take forward the completion of the testing/piloting of the draft policy which would include a process map for commissioning science, post the categorisation. An update will be provided on timescales when this work has been scoped out.

The CEO noted that there were well established principles across the UK and Ireland with regard to what science is undertaken within government facilities and which applied to much of the science undertaken by AFBI and particularly in statutory areas such as animal and plant health. The CEO also noted that AFBI was in discussion with a range of other government institutes regarding the commissioning arrangements in place and that there are a number of good examples of best practice elsewhere which could usefully inform the discussions on commission arrangements.

Ms Teague confirmed that DAERA were willing to consider proposals from AFBI and it was agreed that the CEO would write to DAERA on the issues.

CEO

Dr Carson highlighted that to make the best use of science that data issues such as data infrastructure and data sharing needed to be addressed. He also noted an Intellectual Property (IP) policy was being developed by DAERA. Dr Carson further referred to AFBI's Strategic Cost Model. It was agreed that Ms McAuley would follow up with Dr Carson on these issues, via the Sponsor Branch.

NM

The Chair thanked Ms Teague and Dr Carson for their update, felt it had been a useful discussion and would welcome the opportunity for a further update at a future Board meeting.

6. Board Sub-Committees

6.1 Report of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) Meeting held on 4 February 2025

The Board noted the draft minutes from the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 4 February 2025.

6.2 Report of the Finance & Business Strategy Committee Meeting held on 19 February 2025

Mr Tynan recapped on some of the key topics discussed including the report from AFBI's Research Support Office (RSO) on new bids and contracts. Mr O'Neill also provided an update on the new Procurement legislation and Ms McAuley provided an update on the move to Account NI.

6.3 Report of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 26 February 2025

Mrs Johnston gave a detailed report on the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 26 February 2025. She noted the discussion that took place around asbestos and she noted that the Committee had not received an update from the Head of Health, Safety and Compliance Branch but a further update would be provided at the next Committee meeting on the Integrated Management System. Dr McDowell highlighted that a report was due from DAERA Estates in respect of asbestos management and Mrs McAuley agreed to follow up.

NM

Mrs Johnston covered the key elements of the People & Culture Report and noted that the Annual Review of Progress to the Equality Commission 2023-24 has also been circulated to the Committee.

Mrs Johnston also highlighted that Mrs Campbell had provided an update to the Committee on the new draft People Strategy outlining the four key pillars.

The Committee commented on the reduction of Committee meetings from four to three per year and the Committee feel that they would wish to return to four, which was noted by the Chair.

6.4 Report of the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 4 March 2025

Mr McClelland reported on the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 4 March 2025. He highlighted the update provided on the

work of the Research Support Office, including an update on Horizon Europe. There had also been a further presentation from Dr McCleery on the AFBI Science Strategy.

7. Governance Issues

7.1 Risk Management

7.1.1 *Reports of New or Emerging Risks*

Mr Schön referred to the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme and some on-going discussions with a contractor. It was noted that further discussions would be held with DAERA as the SRO for the project.

Dr Douglas highlighted a risk regarding Customer Relations Management System in relation to the ISLAND Laboratory Information System. He advised that AFBI were working with the Project Team to address the issue.

7.2 Fraud and Raising Concerns

7.2.1 *Reports of New or Ongoing Cases*

Mr Montgomery presented the paper on Fraud and Raising Concerns and highlighted that one new fraud case had been brought to the Executive's attention since the previous Board meeting in February 2025. Mr Montgomery provided an update in relation to the live cases.

7.3 AFBI Business Plan 2025-26

The Board noted the draft Key Performance Indicators for 2025-26 and were asked to provide any comments before 31 March 2025.

**Board
Members**

7.4 Update on Progress against AFBI Corporate Plan 2023-27

Mr Montgomery referred to the AFBI Corporate Plan 2023-27 and that an update on mid-term progress would be provided at the next Board meeting in April 2025 by directors.

Directors

8. Health & Safety Update

Ms McAuley presented the Health & Safety Update. She highlighted an issue in relation to the readings of exposure to Radon at Loughgall premises and how it was being managed. Health and Safety and Estate colleagues in AFBI are working with DAERA and the Health and Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) to ensure that all appropriate actions have been taken. An update will be provided at the next meeting.

NM

9. Finance & Business

9.1 Finance Update Report

Ms McAuley presented the Finance Update paper and outlined that AFBI's projected budget outturn for 2024-25 was within budget tolerances.

10. Economics and Climate Action Presentation

The Chair welcomed Dr Caskie and Dr Wu to the meeting.

Dr Caskie provided an update on the work of the Economics Research Branch (ERB) highlighting research on the economics of climate change mitigation. He highlighted a number of models and methods that were used in the research, introduce counterfactual changes via policy, economy and technology.

Dr Wu gave a presentation outlining the use of systems models to evaluate climate actions in NI agriculture, such as to evaluate the potential economic and Greenhouse Gas (GHG) mitigation impacts of the Climate Action Plan in the agriculture sector. Dr Wu noted that economic instruments would be key to achieving longer term GHG mitigation targets.

He outlined that AFBI ERB has developed system models to evaluate the interactions between economy and environment and that both economic and technical measures are used in climate policy and in achieving net zero targets.

The Chair thanked Dr Caskie and Dr Wu for their comprehensive updates and looked forward to seeing the outputs of the research.

11. CEO and Science Directors Update

The CEO noted a number of updates had already been covered on the agenda.

Prof Magowan referred to a newspaper article on methane emissions which may be published shortly and she would circulate to the Board when available.

12. Chair's Remarks

The Chair thanked the Board and the Executive for their contribution to the workshop on 27 February 2025 and also noted the upcoming AFBI/DAERA Joint Board meeting on 19 March 2025.

13. Any Other Business

The Board enquired if there was any further update on the AFBI Review Report. The Chair outlined that report had been finalised and is with the Department for consideration.

14. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content that the meeting had been effective.

15. Date of Next Meeting

The next AFBI Board Meeting will be held on Tuesday 8 April 2025.