

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)  
Board Meeting held in the Boardroom, AFBI Newforge / MS Teams  
on Thursday 7 March 2024 at 10.00hrs**

**Board Members**

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair	Mr Alan Moore
Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Deputy Chair	Mr Ian Murphy
Mr Martyn Blair	Mr Tim McClelland
Mr David Campbell	Ms Therese Rafferty
Mrs Daphne Johnston	Prof Sally Shortall
Mr Bill Montgomery	Mr Tom Tynan
	Mr Tom Wright

**Boardroom Apprentice**

Ms Laura Ferguson

**AFBI Executive**

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

**In Attendance**

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance  
Mr Conor O'Neill, Head of Finance (Item 8.2)  
Mrs Lynsey Cooper, Finance & Business Management System Project Lead (Item 8.2)  
Dr David McCleery, AFBI Science Strategy Lead (Item 11)  
Mr James Adams, AFBI Secretariat

**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 8 February 2024**

The draft minutes of the Board Meeting held on 8 February 2024 were accepted as accurate and fair representation of the meeting.

#### **4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 8 February 2024**

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

### **5. Board Sub-Committees**

#### **5.1 Report of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 1 February 2024**

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) Meeting held on 1 February 2024.

#### **5.2 Report of the Finance and Business Strategy Committee Meeting held on 6 February 2024**

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Finance and Business Strategy Committee Meeting held on 6 February 2024.

#### **5.3 Report of the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 20 February 2024**

Mr McClelland provided a verbal update on the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 20 February 2024, particularly around the in-depth discussion on the draft AFBI Science Strategy to 2030. Following a brief overview of the Committee discussions, it was noted that this will be further reviewed under Item 11 of today's agenda.

#### **5.4** Report of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 21 February 2024

Mrs Johnston provided a verbal update on the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 21 February 2024 including such topics as the AFBI Values, quarterly HR statistics and the progress of the Staff Engagement Survey actions.

A discussion was also held around the end of year review process and subsequent completion rates. There was a recognition by the Executive on the need to improve in this area and the matter will be given priority as we approach the end of the 2023/24 reporting year.

On the launch of the second Staff Engagement Survey it was noted that while levels of participation had been good for the first survey, a communication plan to staff, to express the value of their opinions and encourage participation, is being put in place.

### **6. Governance Issues**

#### **6.1** Risk Management

##### **6.1.1** *Reports of New or Emerging Risks*

Mr Montgomery reported that there were no new or emerging risks. He also reminded the Board that the Executive '*blank page*' review of risk is due to take place in April 2024.

The Chair referred to concerns around the potential impacts of the forthcoming 2024-25 budget and it was noted that an in-year budget risk on the Corporate Risk Register will be analysed to reflect the 2024-25 budget situation.

#### **6.2** Fraud and Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns

##### **6.2.1** *Reports of new or Ongoing Cases*

Mr Montgomery presented the report on Fraud and Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns which was noted by the Board.

In discussing the whistleblowing / raising concerns process within AFBI, the Chair reminded attendees that the Board had been given an

assurance that guidance and procedures are being applied in line with policy and AFBI had taken cognisance of the action plan published by the NICS following an internal review of whistleblowing arrangements.

There was also a discussion on the criteria used to establish what should be processed as raising a concern against normal course of business. Given the spectrum covered under the subject it was accepted that in some cases it will rely on a judgement call by management. In light of this the Chair suggested that this could be further discussed with the assistance of a few Board members. The Executive agreed to consider how to take this forward.

**GM**

## **7. Health & Safety Update**

The Board noted the Health, Safety and Compliance (HSC) Report.

In relation to one minor incident that is currently under investigation, the Board asked to be assured that that any key messages arising are communicated to staff and that there are no wider issues as a result.

## **8. Finance & Business**

### **8.1 Finance Update Report**

Mr Johnston presented the Finance paper and the following was noted:

#### 2022-23 AFBI Annual Report and Accounts

The final Report To Those Charged With Governance (RTTCWG) has recently been received from the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO). The Chair was pleased to be informed that a number of high priority recommendations from previous RTTCWG had been progressed.

#### 2023-24 AFBI Annual Report and Accounts

AFBI Finance and the NIAO have met to discuss the planning for the audit of the 2023-24 Annual Report and Accounts including the approach to be undertaken and the timeframe to meet the pre-summer recess.

### AFBI Budget 2023-24

AFBI is forecasting an overspend for the 2023-24 budget as at 31 January 2024. This reflects updated Department of Finance (DoF) advice to include a staff uplift for the 2023 pay award. AFBI have been advised that, if the overspend cannot be covered internally as a result of the increased staff costs, coverage has been secured at Departmental level.

The Board noted the financial position in regard to the replacement of the AFBI Research Vessel. The Board was also informed that the associated business case had recently been approved by DoF. The contract is due to be signed this month and it was agreed that the Board would be updated on progress as we approach the end of the financial year.

**Exec**

### AFBI Budget 2024-25

The Board noted the table summarising the 2024-25 baseline against AFBI's submissions to DAERA and with negotiations ongoing between DAERA and DoF, the 2024-25 Opening Budget Allocation is not expected to be available until late April 2024 at the earliest.

The Chair highlighted that associated staff costs and inflationary pressures may need to be absorbed by Arm's Length Bodies as part of the 2024-25 year and it was recognised that this could present significant pressures to AFBI.

## **8.2** Finance and Business Management System Update

The Board welcomed Mrs Cooper to the meeting to provide a presentation on the Finance & Business Management System (FBMS) Project.

Mrs Cooper outlined the options explored during the drafting of the Outline Business Case (OBC) and described two available pathways to achieving AFBI's end goal of onboarding to the planned shared NICS service for HR and Finance, named "Integr8", which is anticipated to be made available during 2027/28. She highlighted the pros, cons and similarities of the pathways and advised on the

reasoning and justification of the OBC process which had determined that 'Option 4 - Account NI Pathway to Integr8' was the preferred option.

Mrs Cooper stated that the FBMS Project Board recommended this option at its meeting on 4 March 2024 which would involve AFBI onboarding to the current shared services finance system ("Account NI") during 2025/26. This would be in preparation for the move to Integr8, which would happen alongside the rest of the NICS. She highlighted that Account NI will not fully meet AFBI's needs in the intervening period to Integr8, but listed the benefits of the preferred pathway and the risk mitigations that will be put in place to aid delivery of the FBMS project.

Following a detailed discussion and a number of questions around the proposed timelines, dedicated resources and associated costs, the Board was content to endorse the direction of travel proposed by the FBMS Project Board. The Chair also added that the organisational changes required to make this successful must be collectively led by the Executive Team.

The Board thanked Mrs Cooper for her time and excellent presentation.

## **9. Executive Report**

The CEO presented the Executive Report. A number of key items were noted by the Board including the DAERA Minister's recent visit to the AFBI Research Vessel 'RV Corystes' as part of the NI Science Festival 2024.

In terms of the Evidence & Innovation (E&I) programme, the Chair was pleased to note the AFBI involvement with DAERA in providing feedback on the plan for commissioning new projects in 2024.

## **10. Update from Directors**

Each Director took it in turn to provide a brief synopsis of matters relating to their respective divisions. A number of key items were noted including the following:

- AFBI Science Day is taking place on 14 March 2024. Items to be discussed includes a selection of projects being delivered by AFBI and the upcoming E&I Call from DAERA.
- Work on the 'Living Landscape' business case in relation to Green Growth is a key priority and will be submitted to DAERA after internal review.
- A webinar on the work being undertaken by AFBI on the Lough Neagh situation is to be held later this month and there are plans to hold a larger event on the matter in June 2024.
- Sampling of Zone 2 of the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme is progressing and following mop-up sessions, Zone 1 sampling is almost complete.

It was also highlighted that the Irish National Accreditation Board (INAB) had visited AFB Stormont as part of the auditing and accreditation process which had went very well. While the process is not complete and formal approval is awaited, the Board thanked AFBI's Quality Assurance Unit and all the staff involved in assisting with this accreditation process.

Mr Johnston also highlighted the establishment of the Corporate Change Advisory Board. It was also noted that while there are pressure points in the organisation, there is a high level of enthusiasm amongst staff to progress projects.

The Chair asked that the Board be provided with a clear overview of the portfolio of change projects being undertaken, what is being prioritised and what potentially cannot be undertaken. The Executive agreed that this would be provided to the Board at a future meeting.

**Exec**

## **11. AFBI Science Strategy to 2030**

Dr McCleery presented a draft AFBI Science Strategy to 2030 which had recently been reviewed and endorsed by the Board's Science Strategy Committee. He also gave a brief presentation on the development and formation of the Science Strategy, outlining commitments, enablers and metrics for success.

The Board was pleased with the advanced version of the AFBI Science Strategy to 2030 and the Chair made a number of minor suggestions around the text and inclusion of more information on strategic alliances.

While there has been consultation with some DAERA colleagues on the AFBI Science Strategy, the CEO highlighted the importance of having the Corporate Plan 2023-2027 already approved by DAERA and that the AFBI Science Strategy underpins how we are going to achieve scientific objectives outlined in the Plan. It was noted that the AFBI Science Strategy will be subject to periodic review. The CEO also emphasised the importance of undertaking a peer review and increased emphasis on impact assessments of the science being undertaken.

The Board was content to approve the AFBI Science Strategy to 2030 subject to the minor amendments and slight revisions to the narrative. The Chair emphasised that the Strategy must have the full backing of the Executive and if there were any reservations or caveats to be declared, the Board should be made aware. In response, a few Directors stated that they had not completed their final review of the AFBI Science Strategy and therefore did not endorse it at this stage. They agreed to provide their opinion on completion of their reviews.

**EM/PJS**

## **12. Chair's Remarks**

The Chair informed the Board that he is due to attend a meeting with the College of Agriculture Food & Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) Director to discuss the Knowledge Transfer elements relating to the SNHS.

He also informed the Board that he has been asked to remain as Chair for an interim period after his Term of Office is completed on 31 March 2024. Formal correspondence on the matter is awaited and the Chair will keep members informed of any further updates.

**Chair**

## **13. Any Other Business**

There were no additional items of business.

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

The Board was content the meeting had been effective.



**15. Date of Next Meeting**

The next AFBI Board Meeting will be held on Wednesday 24 April 2024.