

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)
Board Meeting held in the Boardroom, AFBI Newforge / MS Teams
on Thursday 8 February 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
Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division
Mr Ivor Johnston, Interim Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs Division
Prof Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division
Mr Pieter-Jan Schön, Director of Environment and Marine Sciences Division

In Attendance

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance
Mr Aaron Mulvenna, Head of Health, Safety and Compliance Branch (Item 7)
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.

Mr McClelland informed the Board that he was now involved in knowledge transfer events regarding reports provided to farmers engaged in the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme. The Board noted the declaration and indicated that there was no conflict of interest.

4. Draft Minutes of AFBI Board Meeting held on 2 November 2023 and AFBI Board Workshop on 7 December 2023

The draft minutes of the Board Meeting held on 2 November 2023 and AFBI Board Workshop on 7 December 2023 were accepted as accurate and fair representations of the meetings.

4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 2 November 2023 and AFBI Board Workshop on 7 December 2023

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

The Chair also took the opportunity to thank Mr McClelland for agreeing to Chair the Board's Science Strategy Committee.

5. Board Sub-Committees

5.1 Report of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 25 October 2023, 2 November 2023 and 1 February 2024

The Board noted the final minutes of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) Meetings held on 25 October 2023 and 2 November 2023.

While a number of key topics will be discussed as part of today's agenda, Mr Wright provided a brief summary of the key discussions at the recent ARAC meeting held on 1 February 2024. This included an update on the internal and external audit position as well as the progress of the Finance Systems- Lessons Learned Action Plan. The Committee was assured to note the detail within the action plan and that a Corporate Change Advisory Board (CCAB) had been established

as one of the key objectives to have oversight of the risks of potential projects regardless of scale or value.

5.2 Report of the Finance and Business Strategy Committee Meeting held on 9 November 2023 and 6 February 2024

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Finance and Business Strategy Committee Meeting held on 9 November 2023.

Mr Tynan summarised the key discussions at the Finance and Business Strategy Committee meeting held on 6 February 2024. This included a very positive position in terms of new bids and contracts in 2023-24, the AFBI Budget position 2023-24 and a presentation on the Finance & Business Management System (FBMS).

As an aside, the Chair commented on partnership working and given that this had been raised at the last DAERA/AFBI Joint Board meeting, he wished to have a high level overview of how this is progressing within the scientific divisions.

Exec

5.3 Report of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 15 November 2023

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 15 November 2023 and Mrs Johnston also highlighted a number of key topics and statistics covered at the meeting.

The Board was disappointed to note the 2022-23 End of Year performance review completion rates and asked that this be followed up at the next Committee meeting and a further update be provided at the March Board meeting.

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The Chair noted the on-going recruitment and retention challenges with the number of starters being largely offset by the number of leavers. The CEO reported that the overall trend in leavers was downwards compared to 2022-23. The CEO also noted that there were differences across the two years with 2022-23 being impacted by large public sector recruitment exercises while in 2023-24 the major driver appeared to be turnover at the lower level and entry grades. As there is an ongoing review of recruitment and retention

within AFBI, the Chair asked that a further update be provided to the Board at the appropriate time.

Exec

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.

6.1.2 Quarterly Risk Management Update including review of the Corporate Risk Register

Mr Montgomery presented the Risk Management Update paper and summarised the key changes to the Corporate Risk Register (CRR) following its most recent review by AFBI's Risk Review Group (RRG).

The current position reflects that five corporate risks now sit with a 'Red' residual risk status, up from four in the previous quarter. Mr Montgomery also referred to the 'blank sheet' risk review that the Executive has scheduled for early April 2024. This will be an opportunity to take a fresh look at the risk environment and ensure all relevant risks and mitigations are encapsulated within the CRR.

The Chair felt that the current risk register fairly reflected the current risk environment and suggested that the Executive consider inclusion of a few Board members as part of the blank sheet review process.

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.

He highlighted that there were no cases of Fraud to Report, one new case of Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns had arisen since the previous Board meeting which had been closed out and a further two previous cases of Whistleblowing / Raising Concerns had also been closed out.

In relation to one of the cases previously reported to the Board, which is now closed, the Chair sought further detail on the nature of the case and the recommendations arising from the investigation. In response, the Executive assured the Board that the case and recommendations arising from the case were different from a previous whistleblowing case. Some of the recommendations were more around procedures and escalation of matters. The independent oversight of matters in this area is operating as expected.

6.3 AFBI Business Plan 2023-24 – KPI Outturns at 31 December 2023

Mr Montgomery presented the paper on the provisional outturn of the Corporate KPIs 2023-24 as at the end of Quarter 3, 31 December 2023. Based on the management returns, two KPI's are deemed Red, two KPIs are Amber/Green and three KPIs are Amber. The Executive continues to work towards all the KPIs and is putting efforts into achieving those that are currently behind target but potentially achievable.

On KPI 7 '*Finalisation of the AFBI Science Strategy to 2030..*' the Board noted the agreement that the deadline for this KPI had been extended and that the Executive consider the status and supporting commentary at year end. A question was also raised in relation to DAERA approval of the AFBI Science Strategy and while official approval is not required in the same way as for AFBI's Corporate Plan, liaison with DAERA will take place to seek comments. It was also noted that the Science Strategy aligns to the themes and priorities within the AFBI Corporate Plan 2023-27, which had been approved by the Department.

6.4 CEO Assurance Statement

The Board noted the CEO Assurance Statement 2023-24 – Quarter 3 and that it aligned with the Board's understanding of the key issues within AFBI.

There was also a discussion on the current status and progress in embedding AFBI's Project Portfolio Management system within AFBI. The Board noted recent increased engagement on technical matters with the supplier and the desire to ensure the platform fully meets AFBI's needs. The Chair asked the Executive to ensure that a system

Exec

review is included in the project timelines and further consideration of the extent to which the system will meet AFBI's needs.

7. Health & Safety Update

The Board welcomed Mr Mulvenna to the meeting and commented on the assurance provided in the Health, Safety and Compliance (HSC) Reports that the Board had received since he took up his role.

Mr Mulvenna thanked the Board for the opportunity to meet with them and he provided a number of updates including the following:

- A number of staff in the HSC team have recently completed their probation and cross skilling has been undertaken in order to build further resilience in areas such as Dangerous Goods Safety Advisor, Biosafety Practitioners and Radiation Protection Supervisors.
- AFBI continues to work towards implementing an integrated management system in terms of HSC in line with ISO14001 and ISO 45001 which will provide further assurance in terms of Health & Safety Management.
- In terms of incident management the HSC Branch continue to assist with assessments and reporting, including attendance at Branch meetings to highlight the importance of reporting 'near misses'.
- An IOSH Managing Safely course has recently been rolled out for AFBI staff and Mr Mulvenna was pleased to report that the uptake was already over 60% in the first few days of it being launched.

It was noted that the statistics around 'near miss' reporting was low for 2023-24 in comparison with previous years and the Board asked if there were any concerns in this area. While it was agreed that such figures would be expected to be higher, the continued awareness and education is ongoing in terms of reporting. The Executive is also confident that they have oversight of the key trends in terms of Health and Safety incidents.

In response to a question on engagement with the Health & Safety Executive NI (HSENI), Mr Mulvenna informed the Board that he collaborates with them through a number of initiatives including the NI Safety Group.

8. Finance & Business

8.1 Finance Update Report

Mr Johnston presented the Finance paper and highlighted the following:

2022-23 AFBI Annual Report and Accounts

As per the earlier discussion under the ARAC update, the Northern Ireland Audit Office's (NIAO) draft Report To Those Charged With Governance (RTTCWG) had not been received in time to be considered by the Executive and then the Committee. The draft RTTCWG is with the Executive for agreement as to its factual accuracy and inclusion of management commentary.

In terms of the 2023-24 AFBI Annual Report and Accounts process, the Executive was pleased to note the NIAO commitment to a faster closing process resulting in an audit prior to the pre-summer recess. Planning between AFBI and the NIAO is due to commence shortly.

AFBI Budget 2023-24

AFBI is forecasting an underspend of its 2023-24 budget as at 31 December 2023 which has arisen primarily due to a downward movement in utility costs and reductions in forecast staff costs. The Executive is continuing to closely monitor the budget situation and remain hopefully of being within budget tolerances at year-end. The Chair asked that approach used to forecast both sets of costs are further reviewed and options to refine forecasts in 2024-25 considered.

AFBI Budget 2024-25

Work on the allocation of 2024-25 budgets is underway between DAERA Finance and the Department of Finance (DoF). In the meantime AFBI has been asked to assess three budget scenarios which includes potential reductions in Resource allocation. AFBI will continue to work with DAERA colleagues and a budget update will be provided at the next Board meeting.

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9. Executive Report

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

- The AFBI Corporate Plan 2023-2027 has been officially launched internally and externally. This has included two Executive webinars with staff to outline the plan.
- Work on the review of AFBI's Recruitment and Retention has commenced and the CEO remains hopefully that a report can be delivered by end of March.
- The DAERA led Review of AFBI and is unlikely to commence in 2023-24.
- A number of major research calls have taken significant Executive time and have been prioritised. This is impacted on other initiatives including less time to progress the AFBI Science Strategy at Director level.

There was also a brief discussion on the progress of the Finance & Business Management System (FBMS). The timeline for one potential option was noted as very challenging and concern expressed on the further strain which would be placed on the organisation.

Considering this and following on from the earlier discussions, the Board requested that the Executive bring forward a strategy proposal outlining the way forward on both the finance and business and project management systems.

Exec

10. Update from Directors

The Directors took it in turn to provide the Board with a brief update on the main topics within their respective divisions. This included matters around staffing, large projects, funding calls, accreditation and the AFBI Estate.

The Board thanked the Directors for their updates.

Mr Tynan and Mr McClelland left the meeting

11. Research Vessel Replacement Project

Mr Schön provided the Board with a presentation on the Research Vessel Replacement Project which will provide the required platform for marine research and scientific services for the next 30 years.

He detailed the general principles and drivers which informed the specifications and design of the vessel and outlined comparisons with the existing vessel, the 'RV *Corystes*'. He explained some of the considerations and key changes between the Outline Business Case (OBC) and Full Business Case (FBC) stages and covered a number of aspects including risk mitigation measures and the procurement process to ensure value for money.

In terms of the FBC, it was noted that the DAERA casework committee is to meet week commencing 12 February 2024. Mr Moore, as Chair of the internal gateway review panel, sought clarification on the reduction in optimism bias to 5% and it was agreed that he would meet with the Executive directly after today's meeting to discuss.

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In response to a question on the depth of expertise required and conditions of payment for construction and delivery of a new vessel, Mr Schön advised the Board that the Naval Architect and the on-site project management team provide expertise. There is also the requirement for sign-off and ship registration through the classification authorities before financial transactions are processed.

The Board thanked Mr Schön for the presentation and that the new vessel will provide excellent opportunities for AFBI research and potential wider market value to NI through third party charters.

Ms Rafferty left the meeting

12. AFBI Business Plann2024-2025 – Draft KPIs

Mr Montgomery provided a presentation on the draft AFBI KPIs for 2024-2025 which had been updated following discussion at the AFBI Board Workshop in December 2023 and represented a move to more outcome focused KPIs driven by the direction of the AFBI Corporate Plan 2023-2027.

The Board confirmed their support for this change in approach. They discussed in detail the revised KPIs across AFBI's five strategic priorities and made a number of suggestions and amendments. Mr Montgomery agreed to take these forward and the Chair agreed that Board approval of the KPIs can be completed via correspondence by the end of March 2024.

13. Chair's Remarks

The Chair informed the Board that he is in the process of scheduling a number of meetings with DAERA officials in the next two months and that he had no other business to raise.

14. Any Other Business

There were no additional items of business.

15. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content the meeting had been effective and that all key areas of business had been covered.

16. Date of Next Meeting

The next AFBI Board Meeting will be held on Thursday 7 March 2024.