

**Minutes of the Meeting of the  
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Board  
held at AFBI Newforge  
on Thursday 13 February 2020 at 10am**

**Present – Board Members**

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

**In Attendance - AFBI Executive**

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer  
Dr Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Science Division  
Mrs Josephine Kelly, Director of Finance and Corporate Affairs Division  
Mr Richard McCormick, Head of Corporate Communications (Item 12)  
Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance & Performance

**AFBI Board Apprentice**

Mr Alan Wilson

**1. Welcome and Introduction ACTION**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and set out the objectives for the meeting. In particular the agenda had been developed to provide Board Members with an opportunity to hear from the Executive as to progress made towards the Institute's Corporate Plan for 2018-22.

**2. Apologies**

Apologies were received on behalf of Dr Alastair Douglas, Acting Director of Veterinary Sciences Division.

**3. Conflict of Interests/Register of Interests Declaration**

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

4.	<b>Draft Minutes of the AFBI Board Meeting held on 13 January 2020</b>	<b>ACTION</b>
	Subject to 2 minor amendments, the draft minutes from the AFBI Board meeting held on 13 January 2019 were approved as an accurate reflection of the business conducted at the meeting.	<b>Sec</b>
4.1	<u>Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 13 January 2020</u>	
	The Board noted the progress against actions as per the action sheet.	
5.	<b>Chair's Remarks</b>	
	The Chair updated the Board on a number of recent engagements with stakeholders including an excellent meeting with DAERA Deputy Secretary, Mr Brian Doherty to discuss the move towards partnership working; He outlined that the Mr Doherty was fully committed to working with him and AFBI to develop this new approach.	
	Ms Burns advocated the need to engage with the Department for the Economy, the importance of new digital industries and the need to ensure that there is greater awareness of what AFBI does. It was therefore agreed that the Chair would seek a meeting with InvestNI to progress this.	<b>Chair</b>
	The Board further discussed the critical leadership role of AFBI Heads of Branches (HOBs) in ensuring effective stakeholder engagement. It was agreed that as part of the work of the Organisational Design and Human Resources (OD&HR), the Committee would examine how HOBs could be best engaged as part of the strategic Leadership of AFBI. It was further agreed that the Chair would attend the next meeting of the OD&HR Committee to discuss this.	<b>OD&amp;HR &amp; Chair</b>
	At this point Mrs Cullen advised the Board that she intended to step down from her role as Chair of the OD&HR Committee once a replacement had been appointed. The Board and the Executive took the opportunity to record their thanks for the work undertaken by the Committee and in particular under her Chairmanship.	
	The Chair advised that the recruitment competition for the role of Deputy Chair had been completed and a list of potential candidates had been forwarded to the DAERA Minister. He also advised that he is working with AFBI Sponsor Branch and the Executive to prepare for Board Members completing	<b>Exec</b>

their terms of office to ensure that the Board had the necessary levels of skills and experience. **ACTION**

Mrs Houston requested that an invitation be forwarded to the Chair of DAERA's Audit and Risk Assurance Committee to visit AFBI Hillsborough. **Exec**

## **6. Executive Report**

In presenting the Executive Report the CEO touched on a number of significant issues and positive recent developments. He highlighted the appointment of three Heads of Branch to Economics Research, Livestock Production Sciences and Grassland and Plant Sciences branches respectively.

The CEO further highlighted a number of significant AFBI engagements including the attendance of Pieter-Jan Schön, Head of Fisheries and Aquatic Ecosystems Branch, to provide evidence to the EU Energy and Environment Sub-Committee in the UK's House of Lords, 22nd January.

The CEO also drew the Board's attention to developments in relation to the Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act 1986 inspection previously advised to the Board. He outlined that AFBI were continuing to work with the Department of Health (DoH) Inspector to address issues raised and had agreed to the Beef Facilities at Hillsborough being removed from the licence.

The CEO also briefed the Board on the work being undertaken by AFBI in testing a large number of submissions from poultry flocks relating to an outbreak of avian influenza in the west of N. Ireland. He advised that Isolates to date have been of low pathogenicity (H6N1) with confirmation provided by the National Reference Laboratory at the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA).

The Board discussed the outcomes of recent Internal Audit reviews within AFBI which had thus far been provided with 'Satisfactory' Assurance ratings in 2019-20. The Board also discussed the number of outstanding audit recommendations and noted the actions being undertaken, including a recommendations clinic, to ensure that as many as possible are closed out and with particular focus on legacy issues.

The Board was content to note the report.

## **7. Finance & Business**

## **ACTION**

### **7.1 AFBI Finance Update Report – Position at 31 October 2019**

The Executive presented the finance update which shows AFBI's 2019/20 forecast outturn position as a £540k underspend reflecting the allocated January monitoring round budget and following the latest monthly branch budget meetings. The Executive highlighted that the year to date income/spend levels are currently behind what would be expected at this point in the financial year with a significant proportion of yearly income and spend forecast to take place in the last quarter of the financial year. The increased risk that this presents in relation to achieving the forecast outturn position was noted. The Board also noted the need to improve the accruals process within AFBI.

The Executive outlined that Capital expenditure is forecast as on track however as previously identified AFBI have a risk in achieving a balanced capital budget should there be late delivery of capital items. Capital procurement delivered to date is £1 million leaving £1 million to be delivered by 31 March 2020 which was a significant improvement on the previous year.

In terms of costing, it was noted that draft overhead rates for 2020/21 have been calculated based on 2020/21 branch budget bids. These were to be reviewed and analysed in comparison to budget and outturn overhead rates for previous years and reported to the EMT at the February Finance meeting for consideration. The Board noted that AFBI have committed to DAERA that new overhead rates will be in place for the 2020/21 financial year. Following discussion, the Board noted the general downward trend in overhead rates.

### **7.2 Royalties Update**

The Executive provided the Board with an update on vaccine royalty income. Mrs Kelly highlighted the cover note provided by QUB which had been previously provided to the Oversight and Governance meeting in February and drew the Board's attention to paragraph 2.4 of the report. This outlined that as there has been no further substantial contact with Merial/BI to progress the dispute and have therefore accelerated the search for litigation counsel to progress the resolution.

Mrs Kelly advised that following a procurement process, the universities have been in discussions with a French International legal firm to act on their behalf in order to resolve the ongoing dispute. This was for AFBI to ensure all

appropriate financial governance arrangements are in place prior to signing a retainer agreement. **ACTION**

Mrs Kelly outlined that a business case for proposed legal work is currently going through the AFBI internal approval process and DAERA had been kept fully aware of progress to date.

In addition, Mrs Kelly highlighted work being undertaken by QUB to review the original 1999 DANI/QUB agreement and to supplement this with an additional agreement to outline the decision management arrangements required to conclude this ongoing dispute.

Following discussion the Board were content to approve that AFBI progress with the proposed approach.

## **8. Governance**

### **8.1 Risk Management**

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

There were no reports of any new or emerging risks.

### **8.2 Whistleblowing**

#### **8.2.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases**

The Board noted that there were no new cases. The Executive advised that an HR issue had been received and was being taken forward as a collective grievance by AFBI HR under the relevant policies. An update was provided on the current live case previously reported to the Board.

### **8.3 Fraud**

#### **8.3.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases**

There were no new cases reported.

### **8.4 AFBI Policies**

#### **8.4.1 Draft Waste Management Policy**

The Board were content to approve the draft Waste Management Policy and Statement of intent subject to inclusion of reference to the RV Corystes and AFBI Bushmills site. They also noted the substantial Waste Management Guidance – Disposal of Waste Materials and Waste Management Guidance - Roles and Responsibilities which would be made available to all AFBI staff but advised the Executive to update the guidance to reflect job titles rather than named officers.

**ACTION**

**Exec**

The Board discussed the importance of this issue especially given the increasing importance of environmental issues. They requested that further assurances be provided along with a plan of the necessary actions required to improve AFBI's Waste Management arrangements.

**Exec**

#### **8.4.2** Draft AFBI Open Access & Institutional Repository Policies

The Board approved both the Draft AFBI Open Access Policy and Institutional Repository Policy noting the need to balance open access with the risk of precluding potential Intellectual Property value.

### **9. Health & Safety**

#### **9.1** Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

There were no reports of any new or ongoing risks.

#### **9.2** AFBI Health & Safety – RIDDOR Incident

The Board noted the paper outlining an incident which had occurred in May 2019 which had been reported to the Health & Safety Executive Northern Ireland (HSENI) under Reporting of Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations 2013 (RIDDOR).

There are a number of actions to be taken forward with regard to risk assessments and these are being co-ordinated by the AFBI Health & Safety Manager. The Executive confirmed that these are not expected to impact delivery of the work programmes and that the Board will be briefed of any further updates. The Chief Executive also confirmed that he had advised DAERA of the incident through his latest quarterly Assurance Statement.

The Board requested that future Executive Reports highlight the most significant risks / issues of concern for the Executive.

**Exec**

<b>10.</b>	<b>AFBI Business Plan 2020/21</b>	<b>ACTION</b>
<b>10.1</b>	<u>AFBI Business Plan 2020/21</u>	
	Mr Montgomery gave a brief overview of the draft AFBI Business Plan for 2020/21 and the consultation process to date to develop this along with the Key Performance Indicators.	
	Any further Board comments on the Business plan and KPIs was to be provided to Mr Montgomery and the Board noted that the draft Business Plan 2020/21 would be presented to the Board prior to submission to the DAERA Board and Minister for approval in March 2020.	<b>Board</b>
<b>11.</b>	<b>Board Sub-Committees</b>	
<b>11.1</b>	<u>Draft Minutes from the Audit &amp; Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 28 January 2020</u>	
	The Board agreed to defer the report from the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 28 January 2020 until the March meeting of the Board.	<b>Sec</b>
<b>11.2</b>	<u>Report from Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Self-Assessment Meeting held on 28 January 2020</u>	
	The Board agreed to defer the report from the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Self-Assessment Meeting held on 28 January 2020 until the March meeting of the Board.	<b>Sec</b>
<b>11.3</b>	<u>Report on the Oversight &amp; Governance Committee Meeting held on 10 February 2020</u>	
	The Board agreed to defer the report from the Oversight & Governance Committee Meeting held on 10 February 2020 until the March meeting of the Board.	<b>Sec</b>
	<i>Mr McCormick entered the meeting</i>	

## **12. Corporate Communications Strategy**

**ACTION**

The Head of Corporate Communications provided the Board with a presentation outlining the AFBI Communications Strategy to support the delivery of the organisation's Corporate Plan. Mr McCormick highlighted that the Communications Strategy was designed to address longstanding and complex issues within AFBI and had three high level strategic aims:

1. To create a communications culture within AFBI where the societal impact of science is valued by everyone and where communications is given priority status working alongside the development of world class science.
2. To continue to promote and strengthen the AFBI brand image to stakeholder groups and address the need to increase this profile in the wider community and societal context.
3. To ensure that there is better, tailored communications to all AFBI stakeholders.

The Board discussed the draft strategy and were content with the key areas of focus and highlighted the need for the strategy to be translated into an effective action plan. The Board highlighted the need to ensure that AFBI have identified the level and effectiveness of engagement with stakeholders and address any particular areas of weakness. The Chair advised that he had produced a stakeholder engagement map identifying where formal / informal engagement was required and agreed to circulate this to the Board and Executive. Key to success was to develop an effective engagement plan.

**Chair/  
Sec**

Dr Horton emphasised the need to progress the revamp of the AFBI website to ensure that this met the needs of the Institute and its stakeholders.

## **13. Progress towards delivery of AFBI Strategic Outcomes 2018-22**

The Executive provided the Board with a presentation outlining progress made towards AFBI's Strategic Outcomes as set out in the Corporate Plan 2018-22 and under the 3 key themes:

- Science
- People
- Systems



Dr Magowan highlighted challenges in developing a more strategic approach to measuring the impact of AFBI Science. She outlined progress in relation to the Strategic alliance with QUB and closer collaboration with CAFRE and the importance of relationship building. She highlighted the relative success of AFBI in terms of achieving Horizon 2020 funding and the need to adapt to new funding models in a post Brexit environment. **ACTION**

Mrs Kelly presented a number of the key developments in relation to AFBI's People and Systems. She outlined work undertaken to develop a People Strategy for AFBI and to address cultural challenges. She highlighted the continued development of the Research Support Function and its importance in allowing AFBI scientists to dedicate more time to science.

She further outlined progress made in the Finance Development Plan in terms of strengthening AFBI's Finance function and improving existing systems. She highlighted the significant work being done to progress a new Finance and Business System for AFBI and exploratory work to pilot project management software to better support the Scientists.

The Board commended the Executive on progress to date. They noted the number of significant projects in train or planned and agreed that the biggest challenge to sustaining progress was ensuring that these were appropriately resourced. The Chair also highlighted the need to progress the necessary changes to the Executive Management Team to provide the necessary capacity to lead the required changes.

**14. Any Other Business**

There were no additional items of business.

**15. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness**

The Board was content that the meeting had been effective.

**16. Date of next meeting**

The next meeting of the AFBI Board will take place on 19 March 2020 with the venue to be confirmed.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_  
(Chairperson)

Date: \_\_\_\_\_