

**Minutes of the Meeting of the  
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Board  
held at AFBI Newforge  
on Tuesday 21 January 2020 at 10 am**

**Present – Board Members**

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

**Boardroom Apprentice**

Mr Alan Wilson

**In Attendance - AFBI Executive**

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer  
Dr Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division  
Dr Alastair Douglas, Acting Director of Veterinary Sciences Division.  
Dr John Bailey, Head of Agri-Environment Branch  
Mr Pieter Jan Schon, Head of Fisheries & Aquatic Ecosystems Branch  
Mr Conor O'Neill, Head of Finance (Item 8)  
Mr Shaun Henry, Head of Corporate Affairs (Items 14 & 15)  
Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance & Performance (Secretariat)

- 1. Welcome and Introduction** **ACTION**  
  
The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting
- 2. Apologies**  
  
Apologies were received on behalf of AFBI Board Member, Ms Houston and from Mrs Kelly, Director of Finance and Corporate Affairs Division.
- 3. Conflict of Interests/Register of Interests Declaration**

Ms Burns declared a potential conflict in relation to a grant received in relation to kelp testing. This was noted by the Chair but had no impact in relation to the business discussed. **ACTION**

**4. Draft Minutes of the AFBI Board Meeting held on 9 December 2019**

The draft minutes from the AFBI Board meeting held on 9 December 2019 were approved as an accurate reflection of the business conducted at the meeting. **Sec**

**4.1** Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 9 December 2019

The Board noted the progress against actions as per the action sheet subject to the following:

**5. Draft Minutes of the AFBI Extraordinary Board Meeting held on 17 December 2019**

**5.1** Action Sheet from AFBI Extraordinary Board Meeting held on 17 December 2019

**6. Chair's Remarks**

The Chair updated the Board on a number of recent engagements with stakeholders including meetings with Tim Acheson, General Manager of Lakeland Dairies. The Chair advised that he has provided a summary paper to the Executive on the insight gained from industry from his stakeholder engagements to date, to aid in the development of AFBI's Science Strategy. Following discussions, the Chair agreed to circulate this paper to the Board for information. He also plans to meet with a number of other food producers and associations in the near future

**Chair /  
Sec**

The Chair had also had a useful meeting with Stuart Elborn, Pro-Vice Chancellor at Queens University Belfast (QUB) to discuss practical ways of progressing the Strategic Alliance between AFBI and QUB. He outlined a desire for a plan which clearly outlined the outcomes desired from the alliance.

The Chair outlined his plans to establish a working group made up of Board Members and nominated officers from the Executive to examine ways to maximise the effectiveness of partnership working with Department Agriculture Environment & Rural Affairs.

In terms of developing partnership working with DAERA, the Chair highlighted that following the return of the NI Executive a number of planned meetings had been postponed including: **ACTION**

- The planned meeting with DAERA Deputy Secretary, Mr Brian Doherty in January 2020 to discuss concepts of partnership working had been postponed to early February;
- An Arm's Length Body engagement event which aims to facilitate discussion between DAERA's Senior Civil Service Group and all its ALBs regarding collaborative working.

## 7. Executive Report

In presenting the Executive Report the CEO touched on the extensive Evidence & Innovation which DAERA had commissioned from AFBI and the challenges this presented in terms of balancing capacity within the organisation within the budget provided. He also updated the Board on ongoing discussions with DAERA around the Directed Research Fund (DRF) and work ongoing to reach an agreed governance process around the DRF. Following Board discussion on the potential impacts of delays in approvals he advised that DAERA continued to approve applications but this was being done on a project by project basis.

The CEO highlighted progress in relation to recruitment of key posts including the appointment of a new Head of Agricultural & Food-Economics Branch, agreement on the Candidate Information Booklets for two Grade 6 posts within Finance and Corporate Affairs Division and the intention to relaunch the competition for the Director of Veterinary Sciences Division. He advised the Board that progress in the recruitment of this post was slower than would be desired. This was also being hampered by the current turnover rate of 8% compared to the average 4% which meant that despite the appointment of new staff, the number of leavers meant that the necessary increases in capacity were not currently being realised. The Board discussed these issues and the need for increased workforce planning intelligence and to understand the reasons for the current turnover rate and possible actions to address. It was agreed that the Organisational Development & Human Resources (OD&HR) Committee would take forward this work with the Executive. This is to include: **OD&HR / J Kelly**

- Ascertaining the underlying factors leading to the increased staff turnover rate.
- An Examination of staff Reward and Recognition noting the AFBI Review Recommendation for a review of staff Terms and Conditions.

(Also discussed under Items 13 & 14)

**ACTION**

The Board noted the capacity issues around the number of major corporate projects which are to be progressed over the coming years and the impact on existing and planned work programmes. The Chair requested that the Executive provide a paper to the March Board meeting, setting out a realistic plan of what could and couldn't be achieved based on AFBI capacity.

**Exec**

The Board discussed the outturn performance in relation to absence and requested that future updates provide a breakdown of these to differentiate long term/short term absence.

**J Kelly**

The CEO provided the Board with a briefing on the ongoing issue in relation to the Department of Health (DoH) Inspectorate relating to their inspection of AFBI compliance with the Animal Scientific Procedures Act. Following a meeting between AFBI and the DoH inspectorate on 16 January to discuss stocking density, the Inspectorate have requested that the Beef Facilities at AFBI Hillsborough be removed from the licence. This effectively means that AFBI will not be able to undertake regulated procedures for beef research using these facilities. The Executive advised that DAERA had been kept informed on progress on this issue. The Board noted that Agriculture Branch is currently working through these issues with the Inspector, including looking at practice and interpretation at similar United Kingdom establishments.

The Board was content to note the report.

## **8. Finance & Business**

### **8.1 AFBI Finance Update Report – Position at 31 November 2019**

The Board noted that the signed 2018/19 AFBI Annual Report and Accounts were successfully laid before the NI Assembly on 23 December 2019 with the Northern Ireland Audit Office issuing their associated media release on 13 January 2020.

The Executive presented the finance update report which shows AFBI's 2019/20 forecast outturn position as a £700k underspend. This position takes account of the budget bids and movement requests submitted as part of the January monitoring round. The Board were advised that all AFBI final 2019/20 January Monitoring Round allocations were approved increasing AFBI's funding envelope from £47.6 million to £57.2 million. The Board were advised

that the main risk to this was in realising the levels of budgeted income and Finance are working closely with the branches on this. **ACTION**

In terms of the £2.1m budgeted Capital Expenditure, the Board were assured that the Executive were managing this closely to ensure that this spend was delivered within the financial year.

The Board discussed the forecasted out turn mainly referencing the percentage of projected income which has been realised as compared to previous years. The board expressed concern given that the projected underspend was of a material level. This led to the discussion on the 9 month accounts so that all could assess the risk and resultant impact. The Executive advised that 9 month Accounts for 2019/20 were currently being produced and were to be provided to EMT Finance in February. The Board requested that these be provided for discussion by the Finance & Business Strategy Committee and Board as soon as possible.

**J Kelly  
C O'Neill**

The Board noted that the costed Assigned Work Programme (AWP) for 2020/21 incorporating new overhead rates was still to be submitted to DAERA due to delays in finalising ABIS bids. They were advised that DAERA have been kept informed of the delay and that in the interim the 2020/21 AWP based on direct costs was submitted on 20 December 2019 to Sponsor Branch.

In relation to AFBI's budget allocation for 2020/21, the Executive advised that DAERA were awaiting indications of their Departmental allocation.

## **8.2** Royalties Update

Mr Solomon provided the Board with an update on matters relating to the vaccine royalty income following a meeting with representatives from Queen's University Belfast. The Board noted that the University of Saskatchewan in consultation with QUB have undertaken an exercise to procure legal advice and are in discussions with an international legal firm to act on their behalf in order to resolve the ongoing dispute with the pharmaceutical company involved. They were advised that QUB are currently preparing a cover document for AFBI to ensure appropriate financial governance arrangements are in place prior to signing a retainer agreement.

It was also noted that DAERA were being kept informed of all developments and that correspondence has been issued to inventors to keep them updated on the situation.

*Mr O'Neill left the meeting*

**ACTION**

**9. Governance**

**9.1 Risk Management**

**9.1.1 Reports of New or Emerging Risks**

There were no reports of any new or emerging risks.

**9.2 Whistleblowing**

**9.2.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases**

There were no reports of any new whistleblowing cases and the Board noted that the case reported to the Board at their meeting in December is being investigated in line with AFBI's Whistleblowing Policy.

**9.3 Fraud**

**9.3.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases**

There were no reports of any new or emerging cases

**10. Health & Safety**

**10.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases**

There were no reports of any new or emerging significant cases

**11. AFBI Business Plan 2019/20**

**11.1 Outturns on AFBI KPIs for 2019/20 as at 31 December 2019 (Q3)**

The Executive presented the paper setting out the progress of AFBI Corporate Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) 2019/20 as at 31 December 2019. The current position was noted as follows:

- 14 are on track for delivery (Green);
- 3 are less progress than planned (Amber);
- 6 are not expected to be achieved (Red).

In relation to specific queries on current progress, the Board following points **ACTION** were noted :

- KPI 6 – *'At least 90% of research projects completed for DAERA and external funders within budget tolerances'* - the Board and Executive were concerned as to the performance in relation to this KPI;
- KPI 17 – *'Achieve 80% completion of (2018/19 year end) performance appraisals by 30 June 2019'* – the Board discussed progress made in this important area but recognised the need for further progress by the Executive.

## **12. Board Sub-Committees**

### **12.1 Report on the Finance & Business Strategy Committee Meeting held on 29 November 2019**

In reporting on the Finance & Business Strategy Committee Meeting held on 29 November 2019, Dr Costello-Smith noted that a number of topics discussed had been covered, such as the Directed Research Fund and significant staff efforts around delivering costing information. In terms of the report on new business, the Committee had noted the challenges staff face in terms of available resources and prioritisation. Mrs Hanna highlighted that she had provided a number of comments on the minutes from this meeting. The Secretariat were asked to recirculate following discussion with Dr Costello-Smith.

**Sec**

### **12.2 Report on the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 5 December 2019**

In reporting on the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 5 December 2019, the Board noted that the Committee had discussed the basis for the development of the AFBI Science Strategy 2030. The Board noted the importance of this strategy for setting out a clear direction of travel for AFBI Science.

### **12.3 Report on the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 9 December 2019**

In reporting the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 9 December 2019, the Board noted one change proposed to the minutes.

**Sec**

**13. Fisheries and Aquatic Ecosystems Branch** **ACTION**

Mr Schon provided the Board with a presentation on the Fisheries and Aquatics Ecosystems Branch. This set out the clear strategy for the branch and the science undertaken therein, progress made and the key opportunities and challenges facing the branch. The Board commended Mr Schon for his excellent presentation and in particular noted the good relationships established and maintained with key stakeholders and industry in this area. The Board discussed the challenges around attracting and retaining staff raised. The Board agreed that the OD&HR would work with the Executive to look at Reward and Recognition of staff noting the AFBI Review Recommendation for a review of staff Terms and Conditions.

**OD&HR  
/ Exec**

*Mrs Hanna left the meeting*

**14. Agri-Environment Branch**

Mr Bailey provided the Board with a presentation on the Agri Environment Branch. This set out the strategy for the branch and the science undertaken therein, progress made and the key opportunities and challenges facing the branch. The Board commended Mr Bailey for his excellent presentation and discussed the challenges raised around achieving a balance between delivering outcomes and proportionate governance. The Board agreed that the OD&HR would work with the Executive to look at this issue and how this balance could be better achieved.

**OD&HR  
/ Exec**

**15. Progress towards Delivery of AFBI Strategic Outcomes**

Given the levels of discussion around the 2 previous presentations the Board agreed to defer this presentation to their meeting in February.

**Exec**

**16. Any Other Business**

There were no additional items of business.

**17. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness**

The Board was content that the meeting had been effective.

**18. Date of next meeting**

The next meeting of the AFBI Board will take place on 13 February 2020.

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

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