

**Minutes of the Meeting of the  
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Board  
held in the Boardroom and via teleconference  
on Thursday 25 June 2020 at 1000hrs**

**Present**

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair

**Present via conference call**

**Board Members**

Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Deputy Chair

Mr Ian Buchanan

Ms Kate Burns

Dr Michelle Costello-Smith

Ms Theresa Cullen

Mrs Fiona Hanna

Dr Richard Horton

Ms Joan Houston

Mrs Maureen McKeague

Mr Richard Solomon

Mrs Sharon Smyth

**AFBI Executive**

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer

Mrs Josephine Kelly, Director of Finance and Corporate Affairs Division

Dr Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division

Dr Alastair Douglas, Acting Director of Veterinary Sciences Division

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance & Performance

Mrs Fiona Campbell, Head of Human Resources (for item 9 only)

Mrs Amy Gilbride, Deputy Principal, Human Resources (for item 9 only)

Mr Alan Wilson, AFBI Board Apprentice

AFBI Secretariat

**1. Welcome and Introduction**

**ACTION**

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

**2. Apologies**

None.

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

**ACTION**

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

### **4. Draft Minutes of the AFBI Board Meeting held on 28 May April 2020**

The draft minutes of the AFBI Board meeting held on 28 May 2020 were approved as an accurate reflection of the business conducted at the meeting.

#### **4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 28 May 2020**

The Board noted the progress against actions as per the action sheet.

### **5. Chair's Remarks**

The Chairman updated the Board on his meeting with Mr Brian Doherty. He said it had been a positive meeting and Mr Doherty has been very supportive of AFBI. They had discussed a number of time lines and the focus on what AFBI would be doing over the next few months, which he believed was complementary to what had been discussed at the Joint AFBI-DAERA Board meeting earlier in the year. The Chairman also noted that he was going through his appraisal process with the Permanent Secretary. He further noted that DAERA was reviewing its business plan and KPIs for 2020/21 to ensure that this reflected what would be achievable in the remainder of the year given the disruption of Covid.

The Chairman advised that he would meet with sponsor branch to discuss the NEDs and the partnership arrangements. He welcomed the DAERA led discussions between AFBI, QUB, UU and CAFRE, which he believed was very pertinent moving forward.

Although not a conflict of interest Mr Buchannan highlighted that he had put himself forward as a candidate for deputy president of the Ulster Framers Union and raised the issue of the Beef Facilities at Hillsborough and the article in the Irish Farmers Journal. He was concerned that the article inferred that AFBI/DAERA were not committed to future beef research. The Board discussed the article and the Chair advised that he would consider a response if any was required. The issue had been discussed at the previous Board meeting and the Board were content with actions that had been previously agreed and communications with the Department on the matter. The Board also noted the science work ongoing in this area and the planned webinar.

**Chair**

## **6. Governance Issues**

## **ACTION**

### **6.1 Risk Management**

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

There were no reports of new or emerging risks.

EMT noted that the Covid Risk Register had been drafted, a copy which was included in the Executive Report to the Meeting.

### **6.2 Whistleblowing**

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

There were no new whistle-blowing cases reported.

The Board was advised that appropriate steps had been taken to mitigate a recent traffic issue at Hillsborough and there had been no further issues arising.

### **6.3 Fraud**

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

There were no new cases of fraud reported.

### **6.4 Proposed AFBI Honorary Status**

Dr Magowan and Mr Montgomery presented the *AFBI Honorary Status Policy*, which was being presented for discussion and approval, if the Board agreed. The paper noted that it had been AFBI's Executive plan to introduce an "Honorary AFBI Status" for retired staff/alumni members. This would permit retired members of staff to continue to contribute to AFBI's scientific work through, for example, write up additional scientific papers, and would require AFBI to provide them with the resources needed to do so. These were unpaid posts and therefore there were no Voluntary Exit Scheme (VES) implications, and the only financial implications to AFBI would be around the provision of laptops. A formal policy had been drafted to manage this process, taking into account the potential risks and controls required. It was noted that the document had been discussed by the Science Strategy Committee at its

meeting on 17 June 2020, where it was agreed to refer it to the next Meeting of the Board. **ACTION**

The Board was comfortable with, and supportive of, the policy, and agreed it was an important tool to harness the experience and knowledge of retired staff. After a brief discussion, the Board asked that for a small number of clarifications on terminology used, and that the policy reflected the AFBI IP policy. Once complete this would be brought back to a future Board meeting for approval. **EMT**

## **7. Health & Safety**

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

There were no new or ongoing cases to report.

### **7.2 Health and Safety Update**

Mrs Kelly apprised the Board on progress to date in carrying out risk assessments across AFBI. Risk assessments had been completed for a number of science areas which had been identified as high priority, and a smaller number of risk assessments were in the final stages of completion. All completed and returned assessments were stored in a central data base, and regularly reviewed, particularly as staff returned to the work place. The trade unions had been involved in the process, along with AFBI staff. While it was acknowledged this process may not fully allay the fears of all members of staff, this was a part of the overall framework in addressing staff concerns.

In response to a query in relation to a possible reduction in the social distancing guidelines from 2m to 1m, it was noted that risk assessments were being carried out on the basis of the current government guidance of 2m. A small team had been set up to look at procurement of PPE, in order to ascertain the needs of the entire organization, which would be managed centrally. The Estates team were carrying out risk assessments of the communal areas, and while it had been anticipated all risk assessments would be completed by the end of June, a more realistic date was the end of July.

Mrs Kelly also updated the Board on progress in expanding the resourcing of the Health and Safety unit. A further update was to be provided to the Board on progress in relation to this. **JK**

The Board welcomed the tremendous work carried out, and congratulated all staff involved. **ACTION**

Dr Douglas provided an update on the RIDDOR incident at VSD. He advised that an action log had been drafted based on the actions identified in the H&S report, and the lessons learned.

The Board emphasized the importance of documenting, implementing and maintaining a robust training record system and audit procedure, and it was agreed EMT provide an update on plans for a centralized record management system to the August or September Meeting of the Board. **EMT**

## **8. Minutes of Board Sub-Committees**

### **8.1.1 Draft Minutes of the Organisational Development & Human Resources Committee Meeting (OD&HR) held on 21 May 2020**

The Board noted the draft Minutes of the OD & HR Committee Meeting which was held on 21 May 2020. The Chairman of the Committee outlined the new layout of the minutes, which allowed for key areas of discussion and action to be easily identified.

Members highlighted difficulties in accessing papers from previous meetings via the MinutePad system and the Executive agreed that IT would investigate this issue. **IT**

It was agreed the issue of talent management and salary scales to enhance AFBI capacity in 2020/21 be discussed at the October Meeting of the Board. **EMT / Board**

### **8.1.2 Draft Minutes of the Science Strategy Committee (SSC) Meeting held on 17 June 2020**

The Board noted the draft Minutes of the Science Strategy Committee Meeting which was held on 17 June 2020, copy having been circulated. The Chairman of the Committee highlighted the main topics of discussion at the Meeting.

**BREAK**

## 9. Covid-19 Update

## ACTION

### 9.1 Project Restart – Plans for resumption of AFBI Business areas

Dr Magowan presented a paper titled *Ongoing work in SAFSD and business resumption* outlining key work areas which had continued through the COVID-19 pandemic and plans over the coming months for business resumption to the extent possible. It also outlined some activities that would not be possible to complete in the coming year.

Dr Douglas presented a paper titled *Ongoing work in VSD and business resumption*, detailing the current position for VSD work programmes, those that had continued throughout the current pandemic and the planning for further business resumption during the coming months.

The Executive highlighted that a number of mitigation measures had been put in place, such as splitting up critical teams, that would build resilience in the event that there would be a second COVID wave later in the year, and would be able to build on the lessons learned during the current pandemic, so that AFBI would be able, as far as possible, to maintain its essential work streams.

The Board congratulated the team on the tremendous work being carried out despite the challenges.

### 9.2 People Issues – Health and Wellbeing

Mrs Campbell and Mrs Gilbride provided a presentation to the Board outlining the key staff issues and an overview on the actions to manage staff health and well-being.

Mrs Campbell advised that HR had been dealing with a high volume of queries from staff on a wide range of issues, including child care, those in vulnerable categories, and those wishing to return to work. They were also providing high level support to line managers in interpreting NICS guidelines and were working with H&S to complete risk assessments. It was noted that HR Connect were currently providing a skeleton service, which had had an impact on AFBI's recruitment process, and OH were not carrying out any face to face consultations. On occasions there had been some IT challenges for staff working from home, and overall, these have had the impact of slowing work in the HR unit. HR had also to be mindful of the increased pressure on staff, and evidence of this was already starting to appear. Line managers had been asked to encourage staff to take time off, as well as themselves, to allow staff

time to recuperate and recharge, and it was important to manage realistic expectations of staff during this time. **ACTION**

Mrs Campbell advised that HR had continued to work with HR Connect to prioritize the recruitment of a number of senior posts, which were critical to AFBI's capacity at a senior level, and it was anticipated this process would carry on over the summer months. Mrs Campbell finished by thanking the members of the OD&HR Committee for their generosity with their time, and their helpful tips, suggestions and comments.

Mrs Gilbride reminded the Board that at the beginning of the year, the HR unit had drafted a roadmap for well-being with a number of planned events to be held throughout the year, although a large number had had to be paused given the current circumstances. However, it was intended to pick these up again when staff returned to the office. An accredited mental health first aid training course had been sourced, and training would commence shortly over a period of three weeks. Participants were all volunteers, most of whom were line managers. AFBI's Statistics unit had assisted with the drafting of the staff COVID survey, consisting of ten questions covering a range of issues, which would be circulated to staff in the next week. The survey sought input from staff on their experiences throughout the pandemic, but in addition asked for suggestions and feedback that would be incorporated into an action plan to provide additional support over the coming months. The survey would be carried out both electronically and by mail shot, to ensure all staff had an opportunity to complete it, with a deadline of three weeks.

It was noted that staff newsletters were being issued to staff on a regular basis and that these included a focus on mental health and contained signposts to other support services. The Inspire Hub had been useful in promoting the NHS website, and the Charity for Civil Servants has also provided a range of welfare resources. Other things such as zoom coffee mornings, quizzes and catch up sessions had been useful in connecting with staff. Two mental health training courses, one for line managers and one for staff, had been incorporated as mandatory corporate training for all staff. A mental health tool kit would be provided to managers to allow them to address any issues in their teams.

Mrs Kelly thanked the HR team on behalf of EMT for their hard work, commitment and professionalism throughout the current pandemic. She outlined plans for resourcing and strengthening the unit.

The Board welcomed the update from HR and congratulated the team on the amount of work carried out to date, agreeing that it was important to strengthen the resources in unit. The Board emphasized the importance of encouraging staff to take time off and of managing the transition from virtual office to the work place, ensuring that staff were supported as much as possible.

**ACTION**

**EMT**

The Board looked forward to receiving the analysis of the staff health and well-being survey at its October Meeting.

### **BREAK FOR LUNCH**

## **10. Finance & Business**

### **10.1 AFBI Finance Update Report**

Mrs Kelly presented a paper titled *Finance Update Paper* and outlined the key messages. The report covered the 2019/20 Annual Report & Accounts, 2020/21 detailed budget update Covid-19 scenario planning exercise, 2020/21 capital budget and finance costing update. She provided clarification on a number of issues raised by Board Members.

A successful market warming exercise had taken place for the replacement of the Research Vessel and an update would be provided to stakeholders.

### **10.2 AFBI Budget 2020-21 Update – Impact of Covid**

As outlined at Item 10.1.

### **10.3 Royalties Update**

As outlined in the Finance Update Report at Item 10.1, representatives from QUB have accepted an invitation to attend the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting in July to provide an update on key actions. Recovery of the monies due to AFBI and the wider public purse continued to be a key focus for the Executive. A letter had been issued to all inventors in June 2020 providing an update on the latest position.

## **11. Executive Report – Non Covid Key Issues**

The CEO provided an overview of the key issues contained in the *Executive Report*.



Members welcomed the drafting of the Covid Risk Register and suggested a number of minor amendments to be incorporated.

**12. Any Other Business**

The Chairman commended EMT for their hard work throughout the trying and unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic, and reminded them of the importance of taking some time off to re-charge over the coming summer months.

There being no further business the meeting ended at 1500 hrs.

**13. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness**

The Board was content that the meeting had been effective.

**14. Date of next meeting**

The next meeting of the AFBI Board is scheduled to take place on Thursday 27 August 2020

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

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