

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

Present

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair

Present via conference call

Board Members

Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Vice Chair

Ms Morag Abernethy, AFBI Board Apprentice

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

Mrs Josephine Kelly, Director of Finance and Corporate Affairs Division

Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance

AFBI Secretariat

1. Welcome and Introduction

ACTION

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting, which would focus on understanding the likely outturn position at the end of the financial year, given that it was now the mid-way point.

2. Apologies

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer

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

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 27 August 2020

The draft minutes of the AFBI Board meeting held on 27 August 2020 were approved as an accurate reflection of the business conducted at the meeting, subject to a number of minor amendments.

4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 27 August 2020

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

5. Chair's Remarks

The Chairman began by providing a brief summary of his discussions with Mr Brian Doherty at their recent quarterly meeting. Discussion had centred on DAERA's strategic direction over the coming six months, in terms of the 'Green Growth' concept, as well as leadership development. The Chairman said he had also met with Minister Poots, and the overriding message from both meetings was their continuing commitment to AFBI and the breadth of work it carried out, and how they saw the Institute as vital not only the work of the Department, but to Northern Ireland. The Minister had also welcomed the collaborative work being undertaken between DAERA, AFBI, CAFRE, QUB and UU and had stressed the importance of partnership working.

The Chairman advised that he had arranged a meeting between Invest NI and DAERA, with subsequent meetings hosted between Invest NI and departmental staff. Discussions had focused on a range of energy issues, and carbon reduction. He said Invest NI considered its role as that of connecting the various bodies on these issues.

The Chair finished by advising that he had agreed a number of AFBI NED Board position extensions for the next 12 months, and Ministerial approval would be forthcoming.

The Board noted with appreciation the letter of thanks from the 2019/2020 Board Apprentice Mr Alan Wilson, a copy of which had been circulated.

The Board supported the Chair's comments on the importance of energy issues, in particular carbon reduction, as well as ammonia emissions and stressed the importance of AFBI leading by example in reducing its carbon footprint in all of its activities. It was suggested that an internal carbon audit be undertaken, to be used as a benchmark in order to identify areas of improvement.

ACTION
EMT

EMT agreed that this had been identified as a priority area for the AFBI, and work was ongoing looking at specific areas such as waste management and energy use.

There was a brief discussion on change management and organizational culture, and the ability to respond quickly in a rapidly changing environment. The Board suggested that there was an option at this early stage to broaden the role of Science Strategy Director to be recruited to fully encompass change transformation and management, as they believed it was crucial for the future of AFBI.

CEO

The Chair said it was important to have a clearer view and greater understanding of the potential impact of Brexit at its next meeting given the proximity of the date of the meeting to the end of the year, and he encouraged EMT to plan to have the structures in place to deal with the changes coming.

EMT

6. Executive Report

Mrs Kelly presented the September Executive Report, outlining the key points. She noted the positive results of the recent staff mood survey and the key messages arising from the survey, which would be published on the Intranet to allow staff an opportunity to discuss them at the upcoming EMT roadshows. The first of three planned staff roadshow webinars would take place on Monday 28 September, and staff were invited to sign up for one of the sessions. There would be a Q&A session with EMT, and the main focus of the webinars would be on listening to staff and trying to answer queries raised. HR would also participate, and an update would be provided to the Board at its next meeting.

EMT

The Board welcomed the outcome of the survey, reiterating the importance of staff health and well-being, and encouraged EMT to continue with similar events on a regular basis.

Mrs Kelly noted that there had been significant focus on recruitment of senior management posts and provided an overview on recent and current competitions for key senior posts. The Board welcomed the progress in this area.

ACTION

Mrs Kelly referred to a number of significant highlights in terms of science delivery and Dr Douglas highlighted the impact publication of an industry funded PhD studentship supervised by Professor Nicolae Corcionivoschi, Head of Food Microbiology. He said this was a marvellous achievement and highlighted the high quality of science being carried out at AFBI.

The Board offered its congratulations, and further commended the successful conference arranged by Professor Corcionivoschi in Belfast last year, which had promoted AFBI and the work carried out at the Institute. They agreed that such work should be celebrated and asked that Professor Corcionivoschi deliver a short presentation on the research detailed in the publication at the next Meeting of the Board. This Meeting would be held at VSD Stormont, to facilitate the presentation.

VSD

Mrs Kelly referred to funding opportunities in respect of UK Research & Innovation, and the work being carried out to facilitate AFBI's application for funding. She noted that NIAO had commenced fieldwork in relation to the 2019-20 AFBI audit remotely on 28 August and work was proceeding on schedule. In addition two successful workshops had been held in September on partnership working between AFBI and DAERA, to appraise current working arrangements and identify areas of improvement or development. The output from the workshops would be presented to the next meeting of the Partnership Working Group.

Mrs Kelly brought the Board's attention to the fact that EMT were very sorry to report that Richard O'Hanlon, Head of Grassland & Plant Science was leaving to take up a position in another organization. He would be a real loss to AFBI but they wished him every success in his future career. In respect of two important reports to be published on 30 September, the FAPRI UK report 'Impact on UK Agriculture of Changes to Direct Payments following Brexit' and the Net Zero Carbon, UK Livestock Report, the Board was informed that press briefings would be held and Dr Magowan would keep the Board fully informed.

Mrs Kelly apprised the Board of a security incident at Hillsborough on the previous weekend.

Mrs Kelly updated the Board on a potential science delivery risk in respect of a project partner, and noted that actions had been taken to mitigate any negative impacts. An update would be provided to the Oversight & Governance Committee Meeting. **ACTION**

7. Finance & Business

7.1 AFBI Finance Update Report

Mrs Kelly presented the Finance Update Report, bringing the key messages to the Board's attention. She noted that indications were that the October monitoring round outcome would not be known for another few weeks, and the branch and divisional 2020/21 forecasts reflected in the report were against the current approved June monitoring round budget position. Following the September branch budget meetings the income forecasts had reduced, which accounted for the downward movement of the forecast that had been reported to the Board in the previous month. EMT would continue to monitor this and Finance would work closely with branches to ensure that income projections were robustly reviewed and sufficient evidence provided to support income forecast for the remainder of the year. EMT were also looked at staffing levels as well as stock levels in the run up to Brexit.

The Board suggested that if there were any under expenditure in budgets that budget could be used to provide a range of services to support and promote staff health and well-being, and asked that this be discussed at the next meeting of the Organizational Development and HR Committee. **HR / OD&HR**

Mrs Kelly noted that the DRF Outturn report had been submitted to the Department on the previous day, in advance of the deadline of 30 September 2020. The 2019/20 Unit Costing and Benchmarking report was being finalized, and would be tabled at the EMT Finance Meeting in October before being submitted to DAERA by the end of October.

The Board asked Recurrent Capital table under 2020/21 Capital Budget reflect its status date. **Finance**

The Board recognized and extended its gratitude to the Finance department for the significant amount of work being undertaken with HoBs in highlighting awareness of financial deliverables.

BREAK

7.2 Royalties Update

ACTION

Mrs Kelly presented a paper providing an update on the Royalty Income Dispute, which provided an overview of the historical background, legal position and the proposed way forward.

Mrs Kelly advised that she had arranged to meet with the Chairmen of the Board and the Oversight and Governance Committee respectively immediately after the Board meeting to reflect on the latest position and to agree the next set of actions.

JK

She also noted that a further update would be provided at the next Meeting of the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting and the next Board.

8. **Covid 19 – Progress Update**

Mrs Kelly presented a paper on the Covid-19 Impact, which had been tabled at the FBSC Meeting in September and had been included for all Board members' information. EMT would continue to monitor Covid-19 staff costs closely and she commended the work carried out in getting risk assessments in place to allow staff to safely return to the work place.

Dr Douglas said staff had been encouraged to download the Track and Trace app as part of the controls in place. Stringent risk assessments had been implemented across the organization and were being fully adhered to by all staff. A range of other measures including hand sanitizing stations, awareness raising signage and social distancing regulations were all contributing to a safe work environment. Staff who could work from home were being encouraged to do so, and were being supported in this by IT.

Dr Douglas informed the Board of two recent unrelated COVID-19 positive results in staff at VSD Stormont and Omagh. He also apprised the Board of several notifications to staff via the NI COVID-19 Track and Trace App.

There was a brief discussion on the wearing of masks in the work place, which had been raised at the recent OD&HR committee meeting, and it was agreed to refer discussion to the Corporate Incident Management Team. EMT stressed that AFBI followed NICS and Public Health Agency (PHA) policy and guidelines in respect of Covid and these were constantly being kept under review by both the HR and H&S units. They confirmed that AFBI were offering staff the flu injection in line with the NICS policy.

CIMT

Dr Douglas provided a brief update on the testing facilities at VSD and advised that the Division was equipped and prepared to react to an animal or plant health emergency response if required. The Board asked that EMT informed them immediately if they became aware of any risk to AFBI's statutory duties as result of carrying Covid testing.

ACTION

Mr Buchanan left the meeting.

BREAK

9. Minutes of Board Sub-Committees

9.1 Minutes of Board Sub-Committees

9.1.1 Draft Minutes of the Finance and Business Strategy Committee (F&BSC) Meeting held on 4 September 2020

The Board noted the draft Minutes of the Finance and Business Strategy Committee Meeting which was held on 4 September 2020.

9.1.2 Report of the Organizational Development & HR Committee Meeting (OD&HR) held on 8 September 2020

Mrs Cullen provided an overview of the discussion at the OD&HR Meeting held on 8 September 2020, which included a review of the Committee's ToR, and organizational culture as well as recruitment. Concern been raised about the reduced Occupational Health Service (OHS) and there was a short discussion on possible alternatives, however, it was recognized that there was no quick solution. Mrs Kelly provided an update on the recent strengthening of the HR unit, which continued to play a pivotal service in providing advice to staff during the current pandemic.

The Board asked EMT to investigate possible alternatives to the OHS, including the provision of clinical psychology services for staff.

JK & HR

9.1.3 Report of the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 17 September 2020

Mrs Burns provided an overview of the discussion at the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 17 September 2020, which included a presentation on the early results of both internal and external consultations on the AFBI Science Strategy 2030, an update on new and existing project bids,

strategic collaboration and alliances. She said the discussions had been stimulating and it was agreed that it was important to have a strategy that was nimble and able to react to challenges and opportunities. The Committee also received a presentation on the work being carried out by the Economics Research Branch.

ACTION

10. Governance Issues

10.1 Risk Management

10.1.1 Reports of New or Emerging Risks

There were no reports of new or emerging risks.

10.2 Whistleblowing

10.2.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

There were no new whistle-blowing cases reported.

The Board asked for an update on the implementation of recommendations arising from Case No: WB1-7-19 at its next Meeting.

EM

10.3 Fraud

10.3.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

There were no reports of new or ongoing cases.

10.4 AFBI Business Plan

10.4.1 Review of AFBI Business Plan 2020/21

Mr Montgomery presented the Review of the AFBI Business Plan 2020/21, noting that DAERA had advised all its ALBs that business plans should be reviewed at the end of quarter 2 (September) to ensure that these were realistic and achievable for the remainder of the year. EMT had met earlier in the week to further review the KPIs for 2020-21 as to their continued relevance and achievability. The paper set out the revised Corporate KPIs and highlighted the proposed minor changes for consideration.

The Board asked for, and received, an assurance that the KPIs as set out in the circulated paper were relevant and achievable. The Board then indicated that it was content to submit the AFBI Annual Business Plan 2020-21 to DAERA, subject to reducing the overall length of the document, to make it more succinct and to avoid repetition.

ACTION

EMT

11. Health & Safety

11.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

Mrs Kelly presented the Health and Safety Update Report, which provided an overview of the H&S unit's response to Covid-19 as well as other related issues, including the measures taken to strengthen the unit. She reiterated that AFBI was working in line with PHA & NICS guidance in respect of staff returning to the work place.

The Board noted the Health and Safety RIDDOR Report and asked that a RIDDOR tracker be added as a standing agenda item to future Board Meetings.

JK

12. Summary overview and update on Corporate Projects & Strategies

12.1 Presentation

It was agreed to defer this item to the October meeting of the Board.

Mrs Kelly highlighted the importance of having adequate resources in place to support these corporate projects, and the need to put in place sufficient resources to manage and drive the governance of these and other large projects.

13. Any Other Business

There being no further business the meeting ended at 13:05 hrs.

14. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content that the meeting had been effective.

15. Date of next meeting

The Chairman stated that the rotation of venues for the Board Meetings across the AFBI estate would recommence from October, however, members should not feel under any pressure to attend in person, but could attend via WebEx.

The next meeting of the AFBI Board is scheduled to take place on Thursday 29 October 2020 in VSD Stormont.

Signed: _____
(Chairperson)

Date: _____