

**Minutes of the Meeting of the  
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Board  
held in the Boardroom and via Webex  
on Thursday 27 August 2020 at 1000hrs**

**Present**

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair

**Present via conference call**

**Board Members**

Ms Kate Burns

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, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division

Mr Shaun Henry, Acting Head of Corporate Affairs (For Item 6.2)

Mr Alan Wilson, AFBI Board Apprentice 2019/20

Ms Morag Abernethy, AFBI Board Apprentice 2020/21

AFBI Secretariat

**1. Welcome and Introduction**

**ACTION**

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

**2. Apologies**

Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Vice Chair

Dr Michelle Costello-Smith

Mr Ian Buchanan

### **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 25 June 2020**

The draft minutes of the AFBI Board meeting held on 25 June 2020 were approved as an accurate reflection of the business conducted at the meeting.

#### **4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 25 June 2020**

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

In respect of item 8.1.1 – Draft minutes of the OD&HR Meeting held on 21 May 2020, the Board asked that IT Assist expedite their investigation into the difficulties experienced by Board Members with accessing historical documents on MinutePad, as they considered this a matter of urgency.

EMT advised that Board Members would be provided with a laptop, to assist them in carry out their duties remotely.

The Board also raised an issue re sound quality and communication problems during a number of the virtual meetings, which would seem to be associated with limited bandwidth across the Civil Service IT networks. The Chairman advised that he had been considering possible solutions, given that the current situation would continue for some period of time, such as changing meeting times to avoid peak usage periods or by using a number of linked meeting rooms across the AFBI estate for the meeting, thereby reducing the pressure on bandwidth. There was no pressure on Board Members to attend in person; attendance would be an individual matter for each Member, who were free to continue to participate via conference call.

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

The Chair began by advising that his personal appraisal with the Permanent Secretary had taken place and had gone well. The Permanent Secretary had been happy with AFBI's progress, its alignment with the Department and its direction of travel, and had expressed a level of trust in, and satisfaction with, the vast amount of work carried out by AFBI management on a range of issues, including recruitment at higher grade levels, strengthening of

governance aspects and the focus on developing management and leadership.

The Chairman said he had also met with the Head of Innovate UK in NI to discuss future funding opportunities, the creation of a new research body to allocate funding, and the post-Brexit funding landscape. He asked that EMT consider how AFBI would replace EU funding and position itself to tap into other sources of funding, similar to Horizon 2020. He said it would be useful to have dedicated and experienced staff focus on working with funding bodies, submitting bids and exploring all avenues of potential funding. He referred to the Department's focus on, and commitment to, green energy and the 2050 targets, and said he believed AFBI was well placed to assist the Department in reaching those targets.

The Chairman welcomed the extension to March 2021 of the terms of Board Members Mr Ian Buchanan and Mrs Maureen McKeague who were due to finish at the end of September, and thanked them for their important contribution. He further added that Mr Alan Wilson's term as Board Apprentice for 2019-20 was at an end and said he hoped he had found the experience interesting and useful. He wished him well in his future endeavours. In the same vein, he welcomed Ms Morag Abernethy, present in the Boardroom, as the Board Apprentice for 2020-21, who would formally commence her time with the Board on 1 September. Mrs Theresa Cullen had agreed to act as Boardroom Buddy, and Mr Glenn Montgomery as Executive Buddy.

The Chairman echoed the CEO's congratulations to Dr Alastair Douglas, who was attending his first Board Meeting as the newly appointed Director of VSD.

The Chairman finished by announcing that a Board Meeting would be held on 25 September, as he believed that the next scheduled meeting in October was too far away.

## **6. Finance & Business**

### **6.1 AFBI Finance Update Report**

Mrs Kelly presented the AFBI Finance Update Report, focusing on the key issues of note on the 2019/20 Annual Report and Accounts, 2020/21 Budget Update and the 2020/21 Capital Budget.

She noted that greater detail on the income movement from the June monitoring position and the October monitoring round would be provided at the Finance and Business Strategy Committee (FBSC) Meeting on 4 September 2020.

In response to a query on the matter of Royalties, Mrs Kelly advised that AFBI had written to the inventors on two separate occasions, the first to provide an update and the second to request particular information as required by the legal team, if available. They would be written to again when further updates on the legal advice were available. A business case was currently being drafted following the receipt of legal advice and consideration of options for the next phase of legal action. Discussions were planned with QUB to discuss the advice and a MoU on future working in more detail. An update would be provided at the September Board Meeting and to the Oversight and Governance Committee (OSG) at its meeting in October.

The Board asked to be kept apprised of all correspondence with the inventors.

**JK**

The Chairman expressed his concerns at the current projected surplus given the recent reduction of many of the organization's operations throughout the recent pandemic, particularly in relation to the period to the end of March. It was important that AFBI continued to review its projected financial position in this respect by the end of September ahead of the next monitoring round.

The CEO agreed that HoB estimates were optimistic. He added that EMT had taken a more cautious corporate level view, having recognised the increased risks related to income, associated programme spend and capital spend as a result of Covid.

The Board asked that HoBs carry out a detailed and realistic review of their income forecasts, and that this be considered as a priority.

The Board asked that AFBI Finance prepare six- and nine-month accounts to allow for a realistic overview and to aid forecasting and decision making.

EMT highlighted the improvements in the status of recurrent capital expenditure as compared to the previous year. They also pointed to the decrease in total debt at the end of March 2020, noting that greater analysis would be provided to the FBSC at its meeting in September. The Board welcomed the reduction in the amount of debt over 24 months and sought assurance that this would continue to be addressed, as a matter of urgency. Mrs Houston requested that this information be shared with her.

**JK**

## 6.2 Future Funding Streams

Mr Henry delivered a presentation titled Income: Challenges and Opportunities. The CEO added that it was important to note that many of the external funding streams had a limit on the percentage of overheads paid and that there was the dependency on extent of DRF funding and also DAERA's view on the balance of work undertaken.

The Board thanked Mr Henry for the interesting, detailed and timely presentation. They recognised the difficulties with overhead rates, which were often challenging for the organization, particularly with commercial partnerships, which they believed were an important component of many research applications.

The Board reiterated the importance of having a dedicated member of staff committed to drafting and submitting bids to various funding bodies, including global organizations such as the UN and World Bank, as well a large private sector organizations, and becoming familiar with the processes involved. The significant growth of the scientific and technological support sector to the agri-food industry could also provide future income opportunities, and should be explored. They acknowledged that the organisation was moving into unprecedented times with the twin issues of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, but welcomed the work with QUB, UU and CAFRE, which it is hoped would facilitate access to funding streams and maximise opportunities.

There was some discussion on the limitations of funding opportunities for the organization, and it was noted that a paper on the DRF would be tabled at the next meeting of the FBSC.

### **BREAK**

## 6.3 Business Plan 2020-21 – Quarter 1 Corporate KPI Outturns as at 30 June 2020

Mrs Kelly presented the Business Plan 2020-21, noting that as part of the business planning and performance management framework, AFBI set and agreed 23 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) within the annual 2020/21 Business Plan, which were reviewed in light of the Covid crisis, and it was agreed AFBI continued to report on 21 KPIs. The report set out the provisional

outturn against the revised 21 Corporate KPIs at the end of Quarter 1, 30 June 2020.

There was a detailed and lengthy discussion on KPI 17 – Achieve 80% completion of performance appraisals by 30 June 2019, with the Board expressing disappointment that the KPI had not been met. While progress to date was welcomed, concern remained that it had fallen short of the target. The Board emphasized the importance of performance reviews as a vital management tool, and as a contributing factor to staff health and well-being.

The CEO while recognising the Board’s disappointment noted the exceptional impact and challenges of Covid on the entire organization over the previous months, in particular the need of VSD to prioritise support to DoH with Covid-19 testing while maintaining essential animal health and food safety testing streams. The huge amount of work involved across the organisation in carrying out risk assessments to provide a safe environment for staff was also noted. EMT agreed this KPI would be kept under review moving forward and said they had been working intensively with staff to improve performance. The supporting electronic system had also posed some challenges, particularly in terms of staff who may not had computer access or were on sick leave during the period of report completion.

It was noted that the issue would be discussed in detail at the next meeting of the Organizational Development and HR Committee in September.

The Board asked that the narrative on KPI 8 in terms of research projects be updated to reflect the re-profiling of projects due to the current pandemic. The Board congratulated EMT on the improvement in KPI 18 to reduce absenteeism.

## **7. Executive Report – People, Systems and Projects**

The CEO presented the Executive Report for the period July – August 2020, which concentrated on People, Systems and Projects and Communications. He highlighted the key points of the Report focusing on recruitment, estates and related projects.

The Board referred to the successful series of webinars held over the previous months, and emphasized the importance of having a plan of engagement with stakeholders, which they acknowledged posed difficulties at present.

EMT noted that the webinars had provided an opportunity for participants to ask questions, and that there had been a small number of outside visitors to the Hillsborough site. Engagement with number of key stakeholders on their views and feedback on the development of the AFBI Science Strategy and challenges in the future had already started. Meetings with DAERA had continued throughout the pandemic, and this would be carried on over the coming months.

The Board asked that this information be reflected in the Executive Report.

**EMT**

The Chairman drew the Board's attention to the amount of work carried out by EMT in developing the capacity of the senior team. The increase in recruitment represented a massive step forward and he commended the progress made. The next stage of development would consider training needs when the senior team was in place and the Chair urged EMT to look at how they could foster closer and more supportive working relationships at this level.

## **8. Covid 19 – Progress Update**

The Board noted as read the individual reports from VSD and SAFSD on the ongoing work and business resumption in each Division, and congratulated EMT on the excellent work carried out to date in difficult and trying circumstances.

EMT noted that the biggest challenges in the event of a second wave of the Covid virus was likely to be around contingency, particularly in VSD. While there was not an expectation of the same severity of impact or reduction in work streams as in the early weeks of the pandemic, the possibility of an entire unit having to closing due to Covid remained a risk. Mitigating factors had been implemented to the extent possible, but there was always a residual risk. In terms of Covid testing, staff from QUB as part of the consortium, had been brought on board and were ready to be called upon if necessary. Staff were being encouraged to download the Track and Trace app.

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

### **9.1.1 Draft Minutes of the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting held on 3 July 2020**

The Board noted the draft Minutes of the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting which was held on 3 July 2020.

The Chairman confirmed that no issues had been raised in respect of the recommendation to review all existing AFBI contracts to check for *force majeure* clauses and / or implications from contracts not being completed due to Covid.

The Board asked for an update at its next Meeting.

**EMT**

#### **9.1.2** Draft Minutes of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 10 August 2020

The Board noted the draft Minutes of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting which was held on 10 August 2020. The Chairman of the Committee highlighted the main topics of discussion at the Meeting, at which the newly appointed Internal Auditor had been attendance.

### **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.

##### **10.1.2** Quarterly Risk Management Update

The Board noted the Quarterly Risk Management Update, which had been tabled at the ARAC Meeting held on 10 August 2020.

#### **10.2** Whistleblowing

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

There were no new whistle-blowing cases reported.

#### **10.3** Fraud

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

Mrs Kelly updated the Board on the details of an alleged fraud incident at the Newforge site which had occurred during the previous Quarter and which had been noted at the ARAC Meeting on 10 August 2020.



## **11. Health & Safety**

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

There were no new or ongoing cases to report.

Mrs Kelly advised that the Health & Safety unit had recently separated from the Estates unit, and Mr Connor McGimpsey had been temporarily appointed at Head of the unit. Work was continuing to strengthen the unit and it was important to keep this momentum going. A tremendous amount of work had been undertaken in completing risk assessments across the organization over the summer months, as well as individual risk assessments for staff in the vulnerable category. AFBI continued to follow NI Executive guidance in asking staff to work from home where possible while staff in the highly vulnerable category were being managed in line with health and safety advice. Signage and sanitizing dispenser stations had been erected across the entire estate, and the procedures implemented had been successful to date.

The Board commended the strides taken in strengthening the H&S unit and the superb work carried out throughout the pandemic.

## **12. Any Other Business**

EMT noted that the results of the staff survey would be discussed at the ODHR Committee meeting in October before being brought to the next Meeting of the Board.

The Board referred to recent articles and commentary in the press on the Beef Facilities at Hillsborough. It was noted that OBC approval for replacement facilities was in place and that discussions between AFBI and CAFRE on the project were on-going.

The Board asked for a paper to be tabled at its next meeting providing an update on the work undertaken to date and the work planned in respect of the Beef Facilities at Hillsborough. EMT noted that this would be brought to the Board as part of an update on corporate projects and the AFBI estate.

**EMT**

Mr Alan Wilson, outgoing Board Apprentice put on record his thanks and appreciation to the Chairman, Board Members, EMT and Dr Richard Horton, Board Buddy for their support and time during the past year. He passed on his best wishes to the incoming Board Apprentice.

**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 Friday 25 September 2020

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

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