

**Minutes of the Meeting of the  
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Board  
held via teleconference  
on Thursday 28 May 2020 at 1000hrs**

**Present**

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair

Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Deputy Chair

**Present via conference call**

**Board Members**

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 (present at meeting)

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 (present at meeting)

Mr Alan Wilson, AFBI Board Apprentice

Dr Jonathan Birnie, (For item 12 only)

AFBI Secretariat

**1. Welcome and Introduction**

**ACTION**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and noted that two of the Board members, Ms Roberta Brownlee and Ms Joan Houston, would temporarily step out of the meeting as they had other meetings to attend.

**2. Apologies**

An apology was received from 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 30 April 2020**

The draft minutes of the AFBI Board meeting held on 30 April 2020 were approved as an accurate reflection of the business conducted at the meeting. **Sec**

**4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 30 April 2020**

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

**5. Chair's Remarks**

The Chairman noted that the Partnership Working Group had met recently to discuss how it could support EMT and a report would be brought back to the next appropriate meeting of the Board. He referred to his recent conversation with Mr Brian Doherty, where they had discussed a number of important areas, including AFBI's projected financial outturn and the possibility of using the government's furlough scheme. Mr Doherty had indicated that he was comfortable with AFBI plans over the coming months.

**6. Executive Report & Covid Update**

The CEO introduced *the Executive Report*, and noted that while it continued to reflect AFBI's actions in managing the impacts of the Coronavirus crisis, it also focused on outlining the progress that continued to be made during this challenging time, and the steps being taken to resume further areas of work which had been paused in response to the crisis.

The Board welcomed the Report and asked for an indication of progress being made in terms of planning for the next stages of the recovery phase and an update on the Covid testing facility.

Dr Douglas advised that the Covid testing facility was progressively increasing its testing capacity in a controlled manner. These numbers were driven by the numbers of samples submitted by the Regional Virology Laboratory (RVL). The tests carried out to date had met all the KPIs agreed with the Belfast HSC Trust. The impact, if any, of the testing facility on other Divisional work was being kept under constant review. Risk Assessments were being carried out on an ongoing basis and the Division was looking at how shared spaces could

be managed. The Division continued to retain an emergency capacity in the event of unexpected situations in other work streams. **ACTION**

EMT stressed that a significant amount of time and resources were being directed to the process of carrying out Risk Assessments across the entire organisation, as this had been identified as the highest priority for AFBI as part of its business recovery planning. This work was very detailed and it was anticipated it would be completed by the end of June, however, it was also dependent on the Department identifying the next level of priority work which could potentially restart. H&S were carrying out an audit of PPE and what would be required over and above usual requirements. A wide range of working options were being considered, including staff rotas, continued home working where possible, social distancing, and what measures could be implemented in shared communal areas. They were also following the clear guidance from NICS in terms of facilitating vulnerable members of staff.

The Board emphasized the importance of communication with, and training of, staff in these processes. They stressed the importance of listening to staff, particularly any fears or concerns many may have in returning to the work place, and asked that a survey be carried out to ascertain staff feedback on this matter. The Board reemphasized the need for mental health champions and invited Mrs Fiona Campbell and Ms Amy Gilbride to attend the next Meeting of the Board in June to provide an update on progress in this area. **HR / EMT**

The Board acknowledged that annual leave carried forward could have an impact both financially and on work programmes, but noted the importance of staff taking leave during the crisis. The Board noted with concern that a number of performance reviews from 2018/2019 remained outstanding.

EMT advised that HR in conjunction with IT were planning to carry out a staff survey. It was also noted that the People Strategy and Action Plan had been discussed at the recent meeting of the Organizational Development and HR Committee. They also noted that the NICS had provided a large amount of information and guidance on the Coronavirus and signposted staff to information on health and well-being as well as access to counselling services. In relation to staff analysis during the Covid period, it was highlighted that as more work streams were re-started, the numbers of staff unable to work from home, many of whom were lab based, would decrease. Those staff able to work from home had now been issued with a laptop. Communication with, and between, staff at all levels, to strengthen confidence and build resilience within the organization as a whole remained a priority. At present, the focus

remained on completing Risk Assessments, which would allow for a phased and safe return to a new working environment. **ACTION**

The Board asked that future Executive Reports provide additional detail and granularity to support the statistics and data included and that the next Executive Report in June focus on the plans for the recovery phase across each Division. **EMT**

The meeting adjourned at 1140 hrs for a five minute break.

## **7. Finance & Business**

### **7.1 AFBI Finance Update Report**

Mrs Kelly provided an overview of the key messages within the *Finance Update Report*.

The Board asked EMT to continue to work closely with the Heads of Branches in advance of the October Monitoring Round to ensure that robust information and intelligence was collated to inform accurate assumptions. **EMT**

The Board asked for an update in mid-June on the outcome of the June Monitoring Round. They further asked that any papers for the June Audit and Risk Assessment Committee meeting be circulated as far as possible in advance to allow Committee Members sufficient time to process them. **EMT**

Mrs Kelly advised that the Finance Team would meet in the following week to critically look at the work required in completing the 2019/20 Annual report and Accounts within the deadline stipulated.

The Board asked for an update from the NIAO as to whether the audit timetable as proposed at the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 23 April for August / September 2020 was achievable. **EMT**

The Board welcomed the positive outcome of meetings with the Department to discuss the methodology of the Strategic Cost Model. There was a short detailed discussion on the government's furlough scheme, which it was agreed would be kept under review.



## 8.4 Business Planning

**ACTION**

### 8.4.1 AFBI Business Plan 2020-21 – Revised KPIs

The Board noted the proposed revisions to the Corporate KPIs which had been stipulated in the draft *AFBI Business Plan 2020-21*, a copy of which was circulated, and made a number of comments. It was noted the document would be reviewed again in September.

The Board agreed that focus should be given to harnessing the power of the digital medium to transfer knowledge, innovation and best practice to the agri-food sector, as outlined at KPI 6. This should reflect the move to the new normal of virtual participation in a variety of events using webinars, podcasts, video conferencing and other electronic means, but should be relevant to the agri-food sector. The Board agreed there was significant appetite for digital content, and believed the delivery of the actions from the AFBI Communication Strategy (KPI 14) would be crucial in delivering this. They noted the impact of the media coverage of the Covid Testing Facility at VSD.

EMT explained that the Communication Strategy was currently being reviewed to ensure that it reflected the rapidly shifting trends and demands thrown up by the current crisis. A revised and updated copy would be brought back to the Board at its meeting in June or at the earliest possible meeting.

**EMT**

## 9.0 **Board Governance**

### 9.1 Annual Review of Board Effectiveness 2019-20

The Board noted the *AFBI Board Performance Self-Assessment Exercise 2019/20*, a copy of which was circulated.

The Chairman thanked the Board Members for their input and said the next step was to consider how the Board could improve on the two identified areas for possible attention over the coming year.

### 9.2 Update to Standing Orders and Schedule of Matters Reserved to the Board

The Board agreed to approve the *Revised Standing Orders, Schedule of Matters Reserved to the Board and Scheme of Delegation*, confirming that, if required, Board and Committee Meetings may be conducted, either wholly or partially, on a remote basis using appropriate technological systems (paragraphs 2.1.2

**Sec**

& 2.12.6), subject to the inclusion of a footnote clarifying the term 'present' as being either physical or virtual, same having been circulated. **ACTION**

## **10. Health & Safety**

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

There were no new or ongoing cases to report.

### **10.2 Health & Safety Update**

The Board noted that the recent RIDDOR incident continued to be investigated by HR and H&S and asked that an update be provided at its next Meeting. They further noted that an update would also be provided to the next meeting of the Oversight and Governance Committee to be held on 3 July 2020.

**H&S**

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

### **11.1 Draft Minutes of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) Meeting held on 21 April 2020**

The Board noted the draft Minutes of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Meeting which was held on 21 April 2020. The Chairman of the Committee highlighted the main topics of discussion at the Meeting.

### **11.1.2 Draft Minutes of the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting held on 23 April 2020**

The Board noted the draft Minutes of the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting which was held on 23 April 2020. The Chairman of the Committee highlighted the main topics of discussion at the Meeting.

### **11.1.3 Draft Minutes of the Finance and Business Strategy Committee Meeting held on 14 May 2020**

The Board noted the draft Minutes of the Finance and Business Strategy Committee Meeting which was held on 14 May. The Chairman of the Committee highlighted the main topics of discussion at the Meeting.

**11.1.4** Report on the Organisational Development & Human Resources Committee Meeting (OD&HR) held on 21 May 2020 **ACTION**

The Board noted the report of the Chairman of the Committee on the outcome of the OD & HR Committee Meeting which was held on 21 May 2020.

**The Meeting adjourned for a ten minute break**

**12. Development of AFBI Science Strategy**

Dr Magowan delivered a presentation titled *AFBI 2030 Science Strategy* which aimed to set a vision and mission, key goals and objectives for AFBI science; identify key areas of expected expansion, development, new areas of science/emerging technologies which AFBI should be working towards; identify areas of 'disinvestment'; Identify key enablers e.g. alliances, people/skills, infrastructure, initiatives; and, propose how to corporately measure impact and monitor the horizon etc.

This was followed by a presentation by Dr Jonathan Birnie titled *Managing Risk vs Opportunity in AFBI* which looked at AFBI's ambition for 2030, its strengths / opportunities vs its weakness and risk and its current position and intended position.

The Board thanked both for the informative presentations and made a number of comments, suggesting that the language of the Mission Statement referenced sustainability and the natural environment, both of which should be at the centre of the work being carried out by AFBI. Marine research was a further aspect which should be included. The Strategy should also consider impacts such as policy changes, regional shifts and economic changes. They further suggested that the term 'risk', could be substituted with 'opportunity challenges'.

**EMT**

**13. Any Other Business**

**13.1** CIEL

The Board agreed with the EMT recommendation to apply the principles and approach used to calculate the 18/19 and 19/20 costs when discussing with CIEL the fees for 20/21. .

It was noted a detailed paper would be tabled at the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting which would be held on 3 July 2020.

**EMT**



**13.2** Beef Facilities at Hillsborough

**ACTION**

EMT provided an update to the Board on the intentions on the beef facilities at AFBI Hillsborough and the actions and communications being planned.

**13.3** Collaborative Work

The CEO informed the Board that the DAERA Permanent Secretary had held a meeting at which AFBI, QUB, UU and CAFRE had been represented to discuss opportunities for future collaborative work among the four organizations. Further updates would be provided when available.

**14. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness**

The Board was content that the meeting had been reasonably effective.

The Chairman asked the Board to consider if it wished to hold a meeting in July, given the current situation, for discussion at its next Meeting in June.

**15. Date of next meeting**

The next meeting of the AFBI Board is scheduled to take place on Thursday 25 June 2020.

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

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