

**Minutes of the Meeting of the
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Board
held via teleconference
on Thursday 30 April 2020 at 1000hrs**

Present

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair

Present via conference call

Board Members

Mrs Roberta Brownlee

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 (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 Corporate Governance & Secretariat (present at meeting)

Mr Alan Wilson, AFBI Board Apprentice

AFBI Secretariat

1. Welcome and Introduction

ACTION

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the first Board meeting to be held virtually. He noted that while the AFBI Standing Orders did not specifically refer to virtual meetings, equally there was nothing to indicate they could not happen, provided a quorum was present. Noting that the Board was comfortable to continue, he drew their attention to security, asking them to ensure they could not be overheard in order to facilitate open and frank discussion throughout.

2. **Apologies** **ACTION**

None.

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

There were no conflicts of interest declared, however, the Chairman asked that it be noted he had recently been appointed to the Board of Invest NI.

4. **Draft Minutes of the AFBI Board Meeting held on 19 March 2020**

The draft minutes of the AFBI Board meeting held on 19 March 2020 were approved as an accurate reflection of the business conducted at the meeting, subject to a minor amendment at 7.2 *Royalties Update* to reflect that an update would be provided to the Finance and Business Strategy Committee only.

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4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 19 March 2020

The Board noted the progress against actions as per the action sheet and asked that Brexit remain on the agenda of future Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Meetings. It was further noted in respect of *Item 10.2 Draft minutes of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) Self-assessment Meeting held on 28 January 2020* that a meeting had been held between the Chairman of the AFBI ARAC and the DAERA ARAC, and not the Chairman of the Board as noted in the Action Sheet.

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5. **Chair's Remarks**

The Chairman reported that he had held a virtual meeting with Invest NI, as requested previously by the Board. The meeting had focused on the current situation in relation to Covid and the move towards a recovery phase. He said he also intended to speak with Mr Brian Doherty on the following Monday, mainly to discuss the impact of Covid 19 on the financial outturn for this Financial Year and the possibility, if required, of using the furloughing scheme. He welcomed the Board's views on the potential use of the Furlough Scheme.

6. **Executive Report – Covid 19 Update**

The CEO gave a brief overview of the *Executive Report – Covid 19 Update – AFBI Impacts and Response*, a copy of which was circulated, noting that given the unprecedented times, the report was a revised version of the standard

Executive Report, focusing mainly on the impacts of, and AFBI's response to, the Coronavirus crisis. He said that AFBI in its response had followed Government guidelines and in particular the approach taken by the NICS in relation to maintaining key services and ensuring that staff worked from home wherever possible. It was noted that EMT was now considering and planning for which science streams of work, may re-commence as part of any recovery phase. The report also noted that there may be medium and longer-term impacts of the crisis on future science and funding priorities, but the CEO stressed that it was difficult to predict what these impacts might be at this point. **ACTION**

EMT pointed out that the recent publication from the Department for the Economy on the guidance published on making workplaces safer and a list of priority sectors during the current coronavirus crisis. Scientific Research & Development had been included within the Professional, Scientific and Technical Sectors. This allowed AFBI to plan what streams of work could be brought back on-line, subject to assessing and implementing risk mitigations to protect staff. It was noted that any re-commencement of the Assigned Work Programme would be determined with the Department. AFBI would also need to separately consider what externally funded research might recommence or what work could be carried out remotely. HR were investigating whether AFBI front line staff were eligible for Covid testing, given the recent clarification as a priority sector, and in the event they were, this would be communicated to staff. The Corporate Incident Management Team was looking at a wide range of scenarios in their forward planning for the recovery phase.

The Board stressed the importance of recognizing the psychological impact on staff during this time and the difficulties many may face in transitioning back to the workplace, and asked that this be given a high priority when planning for the recovery phase.

EMT noted the work being undertaken by HR in respect of staff health and well-being. HR would provide an update at the next meeting of the Organisational Development & Human Resources (OD&HR) Committee. They would also provide an update on discussions with the Unions, who continued to be briefed through the current situation.

Dr Douglas provided an overview of AFBI's assistance to the NHS, as part of a consortium which included QUB and UU, in establishing a testing facility at the Stormont site utilising its substantial diagnostic capacity and capability. The facility would be available for an initial period of 12 weeks, and provide

capacity for up to 1,000 tests per day. Testing would begin following the finalisation and agreement of the service level agreement (SLA) with the Belfast Health & Social Care Trust. He confirmed there was adequate PPE for staff working at the facility. He commended the IT section for their hard work in developing a Laboratory information Management System (LIMS) over a very short period of time, which would allow for full traceability and auditing of the processes. Contingency plans had been put in place in the event that the Lamont building became unavailable. **ACTION**

EMT confirmed that the required funding for the testing was being provided by DAERA via an emergency ring-fenced resource bid. This Bid had already been submitted to DAERA Finance. They had established the necessary cost and project codes to ensure that all staff time and costs could be effectively monitored. They further clarified that the Department of Health would cover AFBI's indemnity for the work.

The Chairman praised the professionalism of AFBI staff which had been exemplary throughout this time of crisis. The Board agreed the Chairman write on its behalf to all those staff involved in the establishment and running of the testing facility at VSD to congratulate and thank them for their professionalism and hard work.

The Board further noted the communications which had been sent out to staff since the beginning of the current crisis on a wide range of issues.

The Board endorsed the EMT approach in relation to decisions taken to date on work functions that had to cease in this period. They were content that EMT move to consider which functions might be re-commence subject to health and safety assessments and in discussion with staff and trade unions.

Finally the Board thanked EMT for the reactive and proactive actions taken during this disruptive time. **EMT**

Before moving to the next item the Board asked EMT to continue the process for the appointment of an Internal Auditor, given its important function within the organization.

The Meeting adjourned for a five minute break at 1130 hrs.

7. Finance & Business

ACTION

7.1 AFBI Finance Update Report – Position at 29 February 2020

Mrs Kelly highlighted key aspects of the Finance Report. She advised that the provisional Outturn for 2019/20 had been formally reported to DAERA on 17 April 2020. In relation to the 2020/21 Financial Year, AFBI had been allocated most of the Budget allocation of the New Decade New Approach budget submission which had been made to DAERA in January 2020. However, EMT would now concentrate on closely monitoring the impact of Covid 19 on AFBI to mitigate the financial impacts of the pandemic and adequately plan for the incoming year.

There was a brief discussion on staffing issues, including the possibility of AFBI accessing the Government's furlough scheme. EMT also advised they were planning on concentrating on assisting staff to return to work as safely as possible whenever it was appropriate to do so.

The Board re-emphasised the importance of the documentation and recording of evidence based decisions, as this would prove vital for auditing purposes later in the year. They further emphasised the increased risk of fraud and Internet crime during the current crisis and asked for a paper on how EMT had taken steps to mitigate such risks.

EMT

7.2 AFBI Budget 20 – 21 Update – Impact of Covid 19

As discussed under Item 7.1.

7.3 Royalties Update

Mrs Kelly updated the Board that the legal process had commenced but it had also been impacted by the current Covid situation. She also advised that she had briefed the Oversight and Governance Committee at its recent meeting. An update would be provided at the next Meeting of the Board.

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8. Governance Issues

8.1 Risk Management

8.1.1 Reports of New or Emerging Risks

There were no reports of new or emerging risks.

8.1.2 Risk Management Update

ACTION

The Board noted the *Risk Management Update*, a copy of which was circulated. EMT advised that all staff had been made aware of the heightened risks of fraud, and in particular cyber fraud, during the current situation and had been reminded to follow all the procedures in place for financial transactions. To mitigate the risk of fraud, the limits on the AFBI procurement card had been reduced.

8.2 Whistleblowing

8.2.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

There were no new whistle-blowing cases reported.

8.3 Fraud

8.3.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

There were no new cases of fraud reported.

8.4 Accountability & Assurance

The Board noted the Accounting Officers Assurance Statement for Quarter ending 31 March 2020.

9.0 **Business Planning – Corporate KPIs year-end outturn 2019-20**

The Board noted the *AFBI Corporate Key Performance Indicators 2019/20* and the progress as at year-end outturn 31 March 2020 in relation to AFBI's Corporate 2019/20 KPIs.

The Board asked that an update on KPI 17 in respect of performance appraisals be provided to the next meeting of the OD&HR Committee.

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The Board acknowledged the difficulties in reaching the targets set for some of the KPIs in the current crisis, however, agreed it was important AFBI remained accountable. The Board asked for a paper to be presented at its next meeting reassessing KPIs in light of the current pandemic.

EMT

10. Health & Safety

ACTION

10.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

The Board noted the actions taken in respect of a recent accident in VSD which fell under the RIDDOR legislation, and emphasized the need for comprehensive and accurate investigation of such incidents. They further asked that existing health and safety measures be re-examined to ensure they were adequate.

The Board asked the HR Department to review occupational health support in this case and report back to the OD& HR Committee.

10.2 Health & Safety Update

The Board noted the update as provided at item 10.1.

11. Minutes of Board Sub-Committees

11.1 Draft Minutes of the Organisational Development & Human Resources Committee Meeting (OD&HR) held on 28 February 2020

The Board noted the draft minutes of the OD & HR Committee Meeting held on 28 February 2020.

11.1.2 Report of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) Meeting held on 21 April 2020

The Chairman of the ARAC Committee noted she had requested clarification on one item in the draft minutes of the meeting held on 21 April 2020, following that clarification, the minutes would be presented at the next Meeting of the Board.

11.1.3 Report of the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting held on 23 February 2020

The Chairman of the Oversight and Governance Committee noted that the minutes had been drafted, a number of recommendations had been made and subject to minor amendments, the minutes would be presented at the next meeting of the Board.

11.2 Board Sub-Committees Terms of Reference

ACTION

11.2.1 Science Strategy Committee Terms of Reference (updated 25 February 2020)

The Board approved the Science Strategy Committee Terms of Reference as updated on 25 February 2020, a copy of which was circulated.

12. Any Other Business

Mr Buchanan congratulated EMT on recent AFBI media articles and in particular highlighted recent coverage of AFBI's work on carbon sequestration.

The Board congratulated Mrs Roberta Brownlee on her recent appointment as Vice Chair of the AFBI Board, and wished her every success.

The Chairman notified the Board that he had written a letter of condolence on behalf of AFBI to Minister Poots on the recent death of his father, and noted that had received a letter of thanks in reply.

The Chairman said he would shortly be arranging the first of a series of Partnership Working Group Meetings, which with EMT involvement, would consider best practice in terms of partnership working between DAERA and AFBI.

The Chairman said he intended to meet with the Committee Chairs to discuss how they could best support the Executive Team over the coming months.

It was agreed that the OD & HR Committee would consider the lessons learned during the current crisis and that could prove useful in future change management.

There being no further business the meeting ended at 1310 hrs.

13. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content that the meeting had been effective and worthwhile.

The Board asked the Secretariat to review its Standing Orders in light of the recent pandemic to include virtual Board Meetings and ascertain if a Delegation of Authority could be used by the Chairman or Vice Chairman on

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behalf of the Board in specified situations to assist and speed up the decision making process and report back to the Board.

14. Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the AFBI Board is scheduled to take place on Thursday 28 May 2020.

Signed: _____
(Chairperson)

Date: _____