

**Minutes of the Meeting of the
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Board
held in the VSD Boardroom and via Webex
on Thursday 29 October 2020 at 1000hrs**

Present

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair

Present via conference call

Board Members

Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Vice 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 Board Apprentice

Ms Morag Abernethy

AFBI Executive

Mrs Josephine Kelly, Director of Finance and Corporate Affairs Division (in person)

Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division (in person)

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

In attendance

Professor Corcionivoschi, Head of Food Microbiology Unit (Item 12)

Dr David McCleery, Head of Bacteriology Branch (Item 12)

Mrs Lynsey Cooper, AFBI Secretariat (minute-taker)

1. Welcome and Introduction

ACTION

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

ACTION

Apologies were received from Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer and Mr Pieter-Jan Schön, Director of Environment and Marine Sciences Division.

3. Conflict of Interests/Register of Interests Declaration

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

4. Draft Minutes of the AFBI Board Meeting held on 25 September 2020

The draft minutes of the AFBI Board meeting held on 25 September 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 September 2020

The Board noted the progress against actions as per the action sheet and encouraged the Executive to expedite recruitment for the Science Strategy Director.

CEO

5. Chair's Remarks

The Chair advised the Board that he has invited the CEO of the Armagh, Banbridge and Craigavon Council to visit AFBI Hillsborough on 9 November 2020 to raise council awareness of AFBI's work and how we support the NI agri-food economy.

The Chair reported that he had held discussions with the senior management team of Invest NI and asked Mrs Kelly to arrange a date within the coming months for the Executive to host their visit to AFBI Hillsborough in order to promote AFBI's activities to them. The Executive advised that, with Invest NI's involvement, there were opportunities available for AFBI to increase support to small and medium-sized enterprises (SME) in the local agri-food industry. The Board welcomed news on AFBI's input into collaborative public sector efforts in relation to an enhanced focus on NI's food sector.

JK

The Chair closed his comments by extending the Board's congratulations to Mr Pieter-Jan Schön for his recent appointment as Director of AFBI's newly-established Environment and Marine Sciences Division.

6. Executive Report

ACTION

Mrs Kelly presented the October Executive Report. She highlighted the recent series of SAFSD webinars which are available on AFBI's website or via YouTube and the Board welcomed the impact of these in terms of AFBI publicity in local newspapers and on radio. Following a suggestion to hold webinars in the evenings to reach a wider farming audience, the Executive advised that AFBI needed to be mindful of CAFRE's role in disseminating AFBI's research to farmers and linking with an AFBI/CAFRE strategic direction.

Mrs Kelly updated the Board in relation to a recent meeting held with DAERA to discuss the governance of the Directed Research Fund. She advised that the Department had been provided with all requested information and a follow up letter will be sent to AFBI Sponsor Branch. The Chair reminded the Board of their duty to ensure that the Executive manages this fund effectively to avoid any over-commitment in a given time period and the necessity for frequent reporting to the relevant Sub-Committees.

JK

Mrs Kelly also advised the Board on the three recent Executive 'Staff Roadshows' which had been hosted virtually this year by members of the Executive and senior managers. These sessions allowed AFBI staff to feedback directly to the Executive; one of the most common queries was in relation to recruitment and vacancies. In response to these, Mrs Kelly reported that the Divisional Directors were looking closely at their staffing levels until the end of March 2021 and that a detailed report would be provided to the next Organisational Development and Human Resources (OD&HR) meeting.

JK

Mrs Kelly explained that although a significant recruitment drive had taken place in the last year, there had also been a high number of leaving/retiring staff, when compared to previous years, and as a result the numbers had remained static overall. She reminded the Board that recruitment had actively continued in AFBI since over the summer despite the COVID 19 pandemic, with assistance from HR Connect; however, the process had slowed as a result of its impact. The Executive advised that a reserve candidate had accepted the position of Head of Grassland and Plant Science Branch and would start in the new year.

Mrs Hanna asked the Executive whether AFBI was in receipt of any COVID-related relief funding and Mrs Kelly assured the Board that AFBI has not corporately received any such relief. AFBI has received funding from DAERA to provide an initial twelve-week period of COVID-19 testing in support of the Department of Health. AFBI has requested further monetary cover from

DAERA for a projected shortfall in relation to an additional agreed period of testing. **ACTION**

The Chair asked Dr Magowan to consider the processes behind creating the new Environment and Marine Division from the Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division and she advised that she had been having effective communications with Mr Schön on this matter.

The Board welcomed the Executive's preliminary plans to hold a one-day Science Outlook Conference in March 2021 and noted potential themes being considered. The DAERA Minister has been invited and the Chair encouraged all Board Members to attend.

7. COVID-19 - Progress update

Dr Douglas provided an update on the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus (COVID-19 disease) Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) testing being carried out at AFBI Stormont since May 2020 at the request of the DAERA Minister. This testing supports the Belfast NHS Trust and Regional Virus Lab (RVL) at the Royal Victoria Hospital and approximately 14,500 samples had been tested to date with all meeting the agreed key performance indicator (KPI). The Board noted that the Service Level Agreement had recently been extended to cover an additional twelve week period to 16 January 2021, in which, AFBI has committed to a testing capacity of 1,000 samples per day, although actual numbers tested is dependent on how many samples are received from the Trust and RVL. It was also noted that discussions about providing coronavirus testing, were also underway with the South Eastern NHS Trust. The testing work was expected to come on line in the coming weeks.

Dr Douglas reminded the Board that the winter season sees an increased risk of avian influenza virus being introduced to Northern Ireland via migratory wild birds. He advised that the NHS Trusts were already aware that AFBI may require to temporarily divert resources away from coronavirus testing to deal with animal health outbreaks and that he would be alerting them again to this risk. The Chair informed the Board that he had raised this issue with Mr Brian Doherty, DAERA Central Services and Contingency Planning Group. It was confirmed that if that position arose AFBI would contact DAERA immediately through the normal channels. **AD**

Dr Douglas confirmed to the Board that AFBI was part of a UK-wide contract to receive guaranteed supplies of coronavirus testing reagents and consumables. Across the Division, other critical consumables were being

reviewed where necessary to mitigate any potential Brexit impact after December 2020, although suppliers have advised this is likely to be minimal. **ACTION**

Dr Magowan provided an overview of COVID-19 related matters related to her Division and raised no immediate concerns.

The Board congratulated the Executive and the COVID testing team for their work over the last number of months.

8. Summary overview and update on Corporate Projects & Strategies

8.1 Presentation

The Divisional Directors presented an overview and update on a range of key corporate projects, estates investments and strategies. Mrs Kelly began by focusing on the finance development plan 2019-2022 and outlined key financial, scientific, project and records management systems to be implemented across the Institute to support this. She highlighted that staff resource is a key risk in ensuring that these projects are delivered effectively.

Dr Douglas updated the Board on progress with the new Animal Health Sciences building project at AFBI Stormont and committed to providing a detailed overview at the November Board meeting. **AD**

Dr Magowan reported on the new beef facilities project for AFBI Hillsborough and the Board noted the plans and progress. The Board were also advised of the development of a business case for a new 'Research Emissions Facility' building at AFBI Hillsborough which would be a unique facility within the UK to establish emission factors for ammonia and greenhouse gases as well as enabling novel research to be conducted to address gaseous emissions from cattle.

On progress for the replacement of AFBI's Research Vessel (RV) Corystes, the Executive reassured the Board that consideration of future 'green' technologies would be part of the remit of the naval architects once engaged; the Board noted that the tender process for this service would begin shortly.

Mrs Kelly closed the presentation by advising on other key strategies being taken forward such as the AFBI science, people and communications strategies and a partnership working agreement being undertaken with DAERA.

The Board commended the Executive for the progress made to date and endorsed its support for the corporate projects going forward. The Board drew the Executive's attention to a recent Public Accounts Committee (PAC) report on major capital projects and was pleased to note that the Executive was cognisant of project oversight and governance matters.

ACTION

Break

9. Finance & Business

9.1 AFBI Finance Update Report

Mrs Kelly presented the Finance Update Report, advising that the NI Audit Office (NIAO) was nearing completion of its fieldwork process of auditing AFBI's accounts for 2019/20. AFBI's Audit and Risk Assurance Committee would meet in mid-November to review the NIAO's "Report To Those Charged With Governance (RTTCWG)" and following this, the Executive anticipated that the draft "AFBI Annual Report and Accounts 2019/20" and "RTTCWG" would be brought to the Board's November meeting for consideration and approval.

Exec

Mrs Kelly stated that AFBI's current projected outturn for 2020/21 is expected to be within the required budgetary limits but that the main risks were related to income and staff costs. She reported that AFBI has submitted an initial January monitoring round return to DAERA which reflects an expected non Grant in Aid (GIA) income position of £13m, an increase of £0.5m compared to the October monitoring round. The Executive team had met to discuss the income position. They had agreed to increase the projected non GIA income to £13m based on the current £6m of 'year to date income' already booked in the six month accounts and evidence provided by Heads of Branch to support their forecasted income position

She also explained that the newly agreed commitment to the extension of COVID-19 testing would potentially result in an additional expenditure of approximately £753k based on current assumptions. However the overall net position would require a resource bid for £253k to cover the forecast expenditure. Due to the uncertainty around sample numbers, AFBI has requested that communication with DAERA on the January monitoring round be kept open for as long as possible to enable operational changes to be reflected in the return.

To ensure understanding of the return made to DAERA in the January Monitoring Round, Mrs Kelly noted the following points:-

ACTION

- Income reflected an increase of income forecasted from £12.5m to £13m.
- Expenditure included an additional £753k for budget cover for potential Covid-19 testing costs for the rest of the financial year based on current assumptions.
- The overall net position would result in a resource bid for an additional £253k from DAERA to cover the forecast expenditure with the remaining balance of £500k being covered by income from AFBI activities.

The Chair expressed his concern that this approach resulted in previously ring-fenced expenditure on COVID-19 testing now being offset by AFBI income and requested assurance that the Executive could provide a position paper definitively describing the financial position solely in relation to COVID-19 testing. Mrs Kelly advised that separate staff time and consumable costing codes have been used within AFBI to track this information and this was being analysed by AFBI Finance; a detailed paper on COVID-19 income and expenditure would be provided to the next meeting of the Finance and Business Strategy Committee for scrutiny. The Board agreed it was important that it was satisfied that all information in relation to this programme of work was being correctly captured, including agreements of SLAs with third parties.

Exec

Mrs Kelly concluded by reporting the current position on capital expenditure for 2020/21. The Board raised the issue that £1,277k was currently sitting with NICS Construction & Procurement Delivery (CPD) for action. However Mrs Kelly stated that AFBI had been in contact with CPD and there were no issues projected, nor awareness of any supplier problems. She also assured the Board that the position was kept under regular monitoring and review.

9.2 Royalties Update

Mrs Kelly stressed that the recovery of amounts owed from Royalties remained a priority for AFBI. She highlighted the actions taken since the last meeting. She advised that the Board that the Executive had met with the Chairman of the Board and the Chairman of the Oversight and Governance Committee since the last Board meeting to brief them on the current position and update on the proposed actions with regard to the legal dispute.

The Board noted that a business case to proceed to Phase 2 had been submitted to DAERA. They agreed that it would be useful if a meeting was arranged between AFBI and DAERA to address the queries raised.

**Chair/
Exec**

In relation to legal proceedings, Mrs Kelly advised that the current position was that the two Universities had already proceeded into phase 2. QUB are aware that AFBI is in the process of seeking business case approval to proceed with phase 2, but they were content to proceed with the legal process as legal owners of the patents without obligation from AFBI at this stage. Mrs Kelly advised that AFBI is in regular communication with QUB and is keeping them apprised of the business case position.

ACTION

She also informed the Board that AFBI's internal solicitor had attended the recent Oversight and Governance Committee so that this Committee could be advised on the legal position and the proposed next steps.

The Board asked that an update be provided at the next meeting and also stressed the importance of ensuring that the recovery of monies due remained a priority.

Mrs Kelly reassured the Board that there were regular scheduled discussions and updates with QUB on the matter.

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

The Board was content with the provided paper giving an update on case WB1-7-19.

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 2020/21

ACTION

10.4.1 Corporate Key Performance Indicator (KPI) Quarter 2 outturns

Mrs Kelly presented the KPI report detailing the provisional Quarter 2 outturns against the 2020/21 targets as follows:

- two KPIs were reported as Red (commitments not achieved/not expected to be achieved);
- one KPI reported as Amber (where rate of progress is less than planned); and
- nineteen KPIs reported as Green (achieved/on track for achievement).

The Board were disappointed to note that KPI 17 "*Achieve 80% completion of performance appraisals by 30 June 2020*" was not met, highlighting the importance of the staff performance review process in the development of the organisation and urged the Executive to focus on this matter. The Executive reported that the In-Year review process was currently underway and Directors were raising awareness of this within their Divisions.

The Board had a robust discussion around KPI 8 "*At least 90% of research projects completed for DAERA and external funders on time and within budget tolerances*" which had been reported as red, querying why this target had not been re-considered earlier in the year in light of the coronavirus pandemic. The Executive reported that the project delivery failures had related to time and that although change control processes were in place to mitigate the effects of delays, unfortunately these had not been utilised within the timescales. She also stressed that Covid had an impact on communications and understanding of time frames. Furthermore, the data presented represented a mid year position and whilst it was unlikely that the KPI would be met the Executive noted that further discussion would be useful. It was noted that the KPIs would be presented again in January in the usual KPI report to the Board at the end of quarter 3.

The Board requested that more detailed commentary be provided in future KPI reports.

Exec

10.5 AFBI-QUB

Dr Magowan presented the AFBI/QUB Alliance "*Memorandum of Agreement*" which had been scrutinised and agreed by AFBI's Oversight and Governance Committee and key committees within QUB. Following Executive advice

regarding the drafting of supporting documents related to strategy, programme planning and intellectual property management, the Board was content to approve the MoA for signing. **ACTION**

10.6 BREXIT – Update on AFBI Preparedness

Dr Douglas reported that AFBI was currently working with DAERA to put in place new oversight processes from 1 January 2021 for the EU’s Official Controls Regulations (OCR) which address activities related to animal health, plant health and food safety. In addition, under the NI protocol, AFBI is required to align not only with current existing UK Nationals Reference Laboratories (NRLs) but also with other EU Member State NRLs. This requires DAERA to put in place Service Level Agreements for a number of new NRLs. The Board noted that there was a risk that not all will be in place in time, however, the Executive advised that implications were unlikely to be significant. AFBI is also working with DAERA to map out projected animal, plant and food testing levels from 1 January 2021.

11. Health & Safety

11.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

This item was discussed following item 13.1.3.

Mrs Kelly presented a Reportable Injuries, Diseases and Dangerous Occurrences Regulations (RIDDOR) Tracker paper and brought one new case since September 2020 to the Board’s attention. The Board noted that the OD & HR Committee would scrutinise RIDDOR occurrences regularly and asked to continue to be made aware of any new cases. Mrs Hanna requested that the Tracker be updated to include timelines and responsible persons.

JK

11.2 Health & Safety Update

This item was discussed following item 13.1.3.

The Board noted the Health & Safety update report and commended the actions of the Health & Safety Branch, including unannounced business area inspections, additional guidance disseminated to staff to promote the wearing of face masks/coverings in communal areas and decision trees on actions required to reduce the potential for person-to-person transmission. The Board recognised that these measures would ensure the wellbeing of staff and AFBI’s compliance with COVID-19 public health agency advice. The

Chair requested that Mr Connor McGimpsey, (Acting) Head of Health and Safety Branch be invited to a future Board meeting to provide a detailed presentation and be recognised for the work performed by the team during this difficult period.

ACTION

JK

LUNCH

Professor Corcionivoschi and Dr David McCleery joined the meeting

12. Presentation from Professor Nicolae Corcionivoschi, Head of Food Microbiology

Following a brief introduction by Dr Douglas, Professor Corcionivoschi presented to the Board detailing the ethos of the Microbiology Unit within AFBI's Bacteriology Branch and focused on the benefits of supporting industry-funded research students and collaborating with international consortia. In giving an example of success achieved using this approach, he provided a detailed overview of a study titled "*Impact of industrial parameters on chicken microbiomes: mechanisms to improve performance and reduce Campylobacter*" which was recently published in the high impact journal 'Microbiome'.

The Board thanked Professor Corcionivoschi for his presentation and congratulated him for the Unit's significant work with local and global partners to benefit the food production industry and increasing AFBI's public profile.

Professor Corcionivoschi and Dr David McCleery left the meeting.

13. Board Sub-Committees

13.1 Minutes of Board Sub-Committees

13.1.1 Draft Minutes of the Organisational Development & Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 8 September 2020

The Board noted the draft Minutes of the Organisational Development & Human Resources Committee meeting which was held on 8 September 2020. The Chair reported the Committee's concerns regarding the reduction in availability of Occupational Health Services to AFBI staff, advising that this had been raised with DAERA and work was ongoing to identify and address any gaps.

13.1.2 Draft Minutes of the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 17 September 2020 **ACTION**

The Board noted the draft Minutes of the Science Strategy Committee meeting which was held on 17 September 2020.

13.1.3 Draft Minutes of the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting held on 8 October 2020

The Board noted the draft Minutes of the Oversight and Governance Committee meeting which was held on 8 October 2020.

Dr Magowan, Mrs Brownlee & Ms Burns left the meeting

14. Any Other Business

The Board requested that the scheduling of meetings for 2021/22 be considered early by the Executive to ensure that Committees could meet prior to each Board meeting where possible.

**Exec/
Sec**

There being no further business the meeting ended at 1510 hrs.

15. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content that the meeting had been effective.

16. Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the AFBI Board is scheduled to take place on Thursday 26 November 2020. The Chair signalled his intention to continue to visit other AFBI sites for future meetings and asked the Executive to consider Crossnacreevy and Hillsborough. The venue for the November meeting would be confirmed in due course, but members would still be able to attend via Webex teleconference.

**Exec/
Sec**

Signed: _____
(Chairperson)

Date: _____