



**Minutes of the Meeting of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute
(AFBI) Board
held at
AFBI Newforge (Headquarters), Belfast
on Thursday 24 September 2009 at 10.00 am**

Present – Board Members

Mr Sean Hogan, Chairperson
Prof David McDowell, Deputy Chair
Dr Michael Hollywood
Dr Christine Kennedy
Prof Grace Mulcahy
Mr John McKinley
Prof Stewart McNulty
Mr John Rankin
Mr Kieran Campbell
Mr Nicholas Mack

In Attendance - AFBI Executive

Dr Seamus Kennedy, DCEO
Dr Arthur Gilmour, (Acting) DCEO
Dr Robin Boyd, DCEO
Mr Joel Ferguson, Head of AFBI Innovations
Mr Paul Brennan, Head of AFBI HR Branch
Mr Stephen Cousins, AFBI Secretariat

Visitor – Mr Norman Fulton, DARD

1. Welcome and Introduction

ACTION

Mr Hogan opened the meeting with a word of welcome to all present especially to Mr Norman Fulton, Head of DARD Policy and Economics Division who had requested an opportunity to address the Board on the Pensions Issue. In order to accommodate Mr Fulton the Chair agreed that the Pensions Issue would be taken as the first item on the agenda following the “*Apologies*”.

2. Apologies

Apologies were recorded on behalf of the following Board members, Mr M Walker and Mr J Noble.

Apologies were also received from the AFBI Executive on behalf of Dr G McIlroy, CEO who had received a request from the DARD Permanent Secretary to accompany him to a Northern Ireland Assembly Committee meeting that had been convened to examine the Dioxin Emergency and also Dr Camlin who was unable to attend due to another business commitment.

3. Pensions Issue

Mr Norman Fulton, Head of DARD Policy and Economics Division provided the Board with an update on the latest developments in the Pensions Issue. Following Mr Fulton’s report, the Board were asked to

note that the next step in the process is for both DARD and AFBI to hold a joint meeting, at the earliest opportunity, with NILGOSC.

**DARD/
AFBI**

In response, the Board acknowledged the complexities of the matter, offered whatever support it could and encouraged all to do everything in their power to bring this matter to a speedy conclusion. The Board also noted the assurance that there would be no detrimental effect on the staff involved in the transfer issue, thanked Mr Fulton for attending and will await further developments.

Mr Fulton and Mr Brennan left the meeting at this point.

4. Draft Minutes of the Previous Meeting – 26 August 2009

It was proposed by Mr Rankin, seconded by Dr Hollywood that the draft minutes of the previous meeting held on 26 August 2009 be accepted subject to the following amendments –

Item 5.5 – Finance

Before final paragraph – insert the following paragraph –

“In response to a further query from the Board, the Executive confirmed that contingency arrangements had been put in place pending the outcome of the forthcoming court case relating to the payment of royalties.”

Item 5.5.1 – Remuneration of AFBI Sub-Committees

Second sentence, insert a full stop after “£313” and delete the remainder of this sentence.

Item 8 – Pensions Issue

Second paragraph, first sentence – insert a full stop after “Arthur Cox” and delete the remainder of this sentence.

Item 12 – Implementation of AFBI Strategies

Second paragraph, insert an action point for “Exec”.

5. Matters Arising/Action Points from the Previous Meeting – 26 August 2009

The Chair proceeded on the basis that any matters arising or action points from the previous meeting had been resolved or would be addressed during the course of the meeting except for the following -

5.1 Succession Planning – AFBI Senior Management (Item 5.1.2)

The Board noted that the Executive were still in the process of producing a paper on Succession Planning at Senior Management levels within AFBI and will present this paper at a future Board meeting.

Exec

5.2 Finance (Item 5.5)

The Executive circulated a chart detailing the areas of the business from which AFBI had derived its income.

In the discussion that followed the Board thanked the Executive for providing the information which they stated was of interest to them particularly in light of the current economic climate.

It was suggested that the Executive may wish to consider providing a further breakdown of the information in any future report on derived income highlighting for example, the number of projects within each business area, the costs associated with the projects and a breakdown of the staff compliment.

Exec

5.3 Annual AFBI Performance Review Meeting (Item 9)

The Executive informed the Board that there was still no sign of the minutes from the recent Review Meeting (3 August 2009) but as soon as they become available they will be circulated.

Exec

6. Report from Corporate Services Division

6.1 AFBI Risk Management

6.1.1 *AFBI Corporate Risk Register (CRR) – updated 31 May 2009*

The Executive informed the Board that the AFBI Risk Management Co-ordination Group had met recently and made a number of changes to the AFBI CRR (updated 31 May 2009). A revised CRR will now be presented to the AFBI Audit Committee at their meeting on Tuesday 29 September 2009, for consideration and comment and following this it will then be presented to the Board at the October 2009 meeting.

Exec

Risk No 2 – “*Insufficient resource allocation for AFBI from DARD*”

The Chair gave an indication that cuts in public expenditure were certain to happen and suggested that this should be reflected in the CRR at the highest rating and asked the Executive to consider this.

Exec

6.2 Whistleblowing and Fraud

The Board noted that this issue was still ongoing but in the absence of the CEO, the Board agreed to hold further discussion pending an update from the Executive at the October Board meeting.

Exec

6.3 Health and Safety

The Executive gave the Board an update on Health and Safety issues within the organisation.

In response the Board were pleased to note that the information provided highlighted a general downward trend in the number of health and safety related incidents within the organisation. The Board were also pleased to note that the Executive were taking an active interest in the number and type of minor incidents that were occurring.

Particular reference was made to the number of trips and falls that had occurred during cold periods and the Board suggested that this was an area where improvements could be made.

The Executive reassured the Board that it would continue to focus on health and safety matters with particular emphasis on staff training, including the use of online electronic modules. The Executive agreed to provide the Board with a demonstration of the online electronic modules at a future date.

Exec

The Board also suggested that it would be useful to draw a comparison between AFBI and other comparable organisations of a similar size and nature. The Executive agreed that it would undertake this exercise and provide the Board with a report on its findings.

Exec

6.4 Finance

The Executive asked that the Finance Report be withdrawn as an incorrect version had been provided. The Board agreed and asked that the correct version be issued to the Board via e-mail prior to the next Board meeting.

Exec

6.5 Annual Report & Review of 2008/09 Accounts

The Executive informed the Board that the Northern Ireland Audit Office has approved the 2008/09 Accounts without qualification and AFBI was on schedule to lay the Accounts before the Northern Ireland Assembly before the end of October 2009.

The Board expressed their pleasure at AFBI having received another unqualified set of Accounts for the third year in succession and along with the Executive, paid tribute to the work carried out by AFBI Finance Branch. This tribute was also extended to the work carried out by the

AFBI Audit Committee in scrutinising the Accounts on behalf of the Board.

6.6 AFBI Innovations

The Executive presented the Board with the latest report on the work being carried out by AFBI Innovations Branch and highlighted a number of key issues –

6.6.1 *AFBI Innovation Fund*

This is a new scheme introduced for the benefit of AFBI staff who may require some additional funding in order to advance an idea or project. The funding is derived from PSRE4 and is in line with the objectives of that scheme which focus on commercialisation.

6.6.2 *£25k Awards*

AFBI has three teams in the final stage of this competition and the Awards Ceremony will be held tonight (24 September 2009) in the Northern Ireland Science Park, Titanic Quarter, Belfast. While there is monetary award attached, AFBI accept that this is more to do with raising the AFBI profile. Two of the final entries are from Applied Plant Science and Biometrics Division and the other is from Veterinary Science Division. One of the entries is also a joint venture with CAFRE.

The Board congratulated all of the teams involved and acknowledged the publicity and the joint venture with CAFRE as positive moves for AFBI.

6.6.3 *Visit to Chinese Academy of Agricultural Sciences (CAAS) and Shanghai Academy of Agricultural Sciences (SAAS)*

The Board noted the details of the report on the recent visit to CAAS and SAAS during which AFBI signed a Memorandum of Understanding with SAAS. The main focus of attention following these visits is to develop a framework for commercial working and arrange for increased collaboration between the scientists from both institutions.

The Board expressed their pleasure at the positive report and tribute was paid to Mr Ziping Wu, AFBI Agricultural and Food Economics Branch who had made the visit possible and who also played a pivotal role in liaising with his Chinese counterparts.

6.6.4 *Spin-out Companies*

The Executive advised that a paper was still in draft but as soon as this has been finalised it would be circulated to Board members for consideration and comment as agreed at the previous meeting.

Exec

Further to the report from AFBI Innovations, the Executive also

announced that AFBI had received a proposal to visit the United States of America through funding provided by Invest NI. Primarily this visit will focus on Animal Health issues but there is a possibility that AFBI could become part of a wider commercial trade mission to the USA being organised by Invest NI.

The Board stated that they were fully behind the work being carried out by the Executive and it is clear from the reports that have been received that the commercialisation of AFBI is making substantial progress. The Board congratulated the Executive and in particular AFBI Innovations Branch and asked to be kept appraised of developments.

7. Shared Services – HR Connect and Account NI

The Executive reported that there was no change in the service provided by Account NI and it was still being embedded within the organisation.

However, the problems associated with HR Connect continue to plague the organisation.

The Board expressed its appreciation to the AFBI staff involved in dealing with HR Connect issues and asked the Executive to keep pushing for a resolution to the ongoing problems and keep the Board appraised of the situation.

Exec

8. Rewards and Recognition to Staff Scheme (RRSS)

The Chair of the AFBI Remuneration Committee (RC), Prof David McDowell presented a note to the Board on the recent meeting of the RC held on 4 September 2009.

The Board noted that the RC was content that there were no substantial changes to the RRSS and in keeping with their remit the RC had forwarded the document to DARD on 8 September 2009 for onward transmission to the Department of Finance and Personnel.

The Board were asked to note two points arising from the RC deliberations:

1. The role of the RC will be to check that procedures are in place and more importantly that these have been followed.
2. The RC accepted that the document submitted to DARD outlines the policy but the Executive will need to draft the Standing Orders/Procedures on the practical workings of the Scheme and present them to the RC for review and comment.

Exec

9. Board Effectiveness Review (BER)– Review Summary

The Chair reported that the Review was now in the final phase and the AFBI Senior Management Team were due to hold a further meeting with Mr Parker (facilitator) tomorrow (Friday 25 September 2009).

Following this meeting the Chair and the CEO will hopefully be in a position to provide the DARD Minister and the DARD Permanent Secretary with an update as both had expressed a desire during the recent Performance Review Meeting, to see the outworkings and proposals from the BER.

In summarising, the Chair outlined that the purpose behind the Review was to provide him, the Board and the Executive with an external validation of the work being undertaken by the Board and try to obtain a means of moving forward that would allow the Board to become a strategic Board rather than a monitoring Board.

In commenting the Board members agreed that it had been a worthwhile exercise but were of the opinion that the real test of whether or not the exercise had been successful would rest on the successful implementation of the recommendations arising from Mr Parker's report.

The Chair advised that as soon as Mr Parker's report has been completed it will be circulated to the Board and placed on the agenda for further discussion at a future Board meeting.

Chair

10. Implementation of AFBI Strategies

The Executive gave the Board an update on the progress being made in relation to two of the three strategies namely the HR Strategy and the Business and Science Strategy.

HR Strategy – The Board were informed that the morale and motivation survey had been completed and a report should be available towards the end of October 2009. The results from this survey will influence the work being carried out by the four project teams which are currently engaged in a number of scoping exercises.

Business and Science Strategy – There are three project teams working in this area and all have met and are making variable progress. External assistance has had to be obtained in order to re-focus some of the teams and a workshop is due to be held at the end of October 2009.

The Board thanked the Executive for the positive report and acknowledged the work being undertaken and the staff commitment involved and thanked all of those taking part.

The Board also requested that a brief report on the work of the Assets Strategy be provided in advance of the next meeting.

Exec

11. Any Other Business

11.1 Open Meeting – Preliminary Arrangements

Following discussion the Board agreed that the format for the Open Meeting should be along similar lines as last year's event with three presentations being given.

The topics suggested for consideration were –

1. The strategic direction of the AFBI Board
2. Scientific overview of AFBI
3. Financial presentation of the 2008/09 Accounts
4. The work of AFBI Innovations

The Board signified that they were content to leave a final decision on the topics and the running order to the Chair and the CEO and were also content for the event to be held in the New Year (2010). However, the Board did ask the Executive to ensure that invites are issued well in advance of the agreed date to allow those that would like to attend time to make arrangements and note their diary.

Exec

11.2 Report from National Ploughing Championships

The Chair reported that once again this had been a very successful event and everything associated with it had gone very well. This year the location of the AFBI stand was in a prominent position and had been well set-up with a number of current topics as well as some very useful input from TEAGASC. The DARD Minister, Michelle Gildernew MP MLA had visited the stand on a number of occasions and during the course of her visit had expressed her pleasure at the work being carried out by AFBI. The Chair also advised that the event had provided him and the CEO with an opportunity to have lunch with the Minister.

A report from a member of the Board, who had attended the event in a personal capacity, supported the views of the Chair and underlined how much he had been impressed with the event and AFBI's contribution to it.

In light of the positive feedback the Board and the Executive agreed that AFBI will continue to exhibit at future events

11.3 Opening of Refurbished Courtyard Building and Conference Facilities at AFBI Hillsborough

The Board noted that arrangements for the opening of the refurbished facilities at AFBI Hillsborough were at an advanced stage. Confirmation was given that the Official Opening Ceremony would be conducted by the DARD Minister, Michelle Gildernew MP MLA and all Board members have received invitations.

11.4 Proposed Relocation of Crossnacreevy

The Board accepted a proposal from the Executive that Board members would receive an update on this issue prior to the next Board meeting in October 2009.

Exec

11.5 Dioxin Emergency

As had been mentioned at the start of the meeting, the Northern Ireland Assembly Agricultural and Rural Development Committee was meeting today to take oral evidence and the DARD Permanent Secretary, Dr Malcolm McKibbin had invited the CEO, Dr McIlroy to join DARD officials at the committee meeting.

The Executive also advised the Board that AFBI had also submitted a paper to the McKenzie Inquiry which has been established to examine the handling of the dioxin feed contamination event in Northern Ireland.

AFBI is preparing an economic appraisal for a dioxin testing laboratory for submission to DARD, as no such facility currently exists on the island of Ireland and a local capacity to provide a rapid response was required to help protect the Northern Ireland industry from the potentially major adverse impacts of future dioxin contamination events.

11.6 Pandemic Flu in Pigs

The Executive informed the Board that AFBI had identified the human pandemic strain of H1N1 influenza virus in two pig herds in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland has therefore become only the fourth country in the world to do so. Veterinary Sciences Division staff had worked late at night and at weekends to ensure that results were available to DARD in a timely manner. They had carried out partial genome sequencing of both viruses to confirm that the virus present was the pandemic H1N1 strain. The Community Reference Laboratory at the Veterinary Laboratories Agency had confirmed the AFBI results and also carried out complete genome sequencing which indicated that the human virus had not undergone genetic change since infecting these pigs.

The finding of the pandemic virus in local pigs emphasised the need for pig farmers to maintain strict biosecurity. DARD had recently agreed a code of practice with the industry which was available on the DARD website.

The Executive agreed to keep the Board updated on developments re Pandemic Flu in Pigs.

Exec

11.7 Rolling Database of Issues Raised at Board Meetings

The Board noted the changes made to the Rolling Database of Issues Raised at Board Meetings and signified that they were content. A further update will be provided by the Secretariat for the next meeting (October 2009).

Sec

12. Date of Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Board will be held on Wednesday 28 October 2009.

Signed: _____
(Chairperson)

Date: _____