



**Minutes of the Meeting of the  
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Board Strategy Workshop  
held at Ulster Farmers' Union (HQ),  
on Monday, 5 February 2018 at 10.00am**

**Present – Board Members**

Mr Colm McKenna, Chair	Dr Michelle Costello-Smith	Ms Joan Houston
Mr Colin Coffey, Deputy Chair	Ms Theresa Cullen	Mrs Maureen McKeague
Mrs Roberta Brownlee	Mrs Fiona Hanna	Mrs Sharon Smyth
Mr Ian Buchanan	Dr Richard Horton	Mr Richard Solomon
Ms Kate Burns		

**In Attendance - AFBI Executive**

Dr Sinclair Mayne, Chief Executive Officer  
Mrs Josephine Kelly, Director of Finance and Corporate Affairs Division  
Dr Stanley McDowell, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division  
Dr Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division  
Mrs Fiona Campbell, Head of Human Resources  
Mr James Adams, AFBI Secretariat

**Visitors**

Dr Alistair Carson, Director of Science Evidence and Innovation Policy Division DAERA (Items 6-8)  
Ms Janet Uhlemann, AFBI Sponsor Branch (Item 6)

Mr Wesley Aston, Chief Executive Officer Ulster Farmers' Union (Item 12)  
Mr Barclay Bell, President Ulster Farmers' Union (Item 12)  
Mr Ivor Ferguson, Deputy President Ulster Farmers' Union (Item 12)  
Mr Victor Chestnutt, Deputy President Ulster Farmers' Union (Item 12)

**1. Welcome and Introduction**

**ACTION**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the AFBI Board Strategy Workshop, especially Mrs Brownlee and Ms Burns who were attending their first workshop having been recently appointed to the AFBI Board. Given the circumstances, the chair commenced proceedings with round the table introductions.

**2. Apologies**

There were no apologies.

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

There were no conflicts of interest to be recorded.

#### 4. **Draft Minutes of AFBI Board Strategy Workshop held 19 October 2017**

The draft minutes from the AFBI Board Strategy Workshop held on 19 October 2017 were approved as an accurate reflection of the business conducted at the meeting.

#### 5. **Action Sheet from AFBI Board Strategy Workshop held on 19 October 2017**

The Board noted the progress against actions as per the action sheet, subject to the following:

##### 5.1 Structure and Vision of AFBI Scientific Programmes (Item 7)

It was noted that the action in relation to the structure and vision of AFBI Scientific Programmes was in progress rather than complete. A verbal update had been provided to the Science Strategy Committee at its meeting on 2 November 2017 and it was agreed that the Executive required additional time to re-evaluate the programmes and develop a clear roadmap.

#### 6. **Update on Progress with VSD New Build**

Dr McDowell commenced a presentation on the progress of a new build at VSD by highlighting the importance of the project to the Department and AFBI in delivering future work programmes. The vision is to make the new building a flagship for NI's agri-food sector by delivering world class science over the next 50 years. Internally, the new accommodation is envisaged to be inspirational, flexible, and efficient and promote collaborative working.

*Mr Buchanan entered the meeting*

Ms Uhlemann then outlined the progress since the last update to the AFBI Board was provided which included the following:-

- Funding for the new build has been incorporated into DAERA's capital bid and submitted to the Department of Finance;
- The Project Board had been established and included Dr Carson as the Senior Responsible Officer and Ms Uhlemann as the Project Sponsor.
- The Project Board will report to the DAERA Science Transformation Programme Board which is chaired by Mr Colin Lewis, the Senior Reporting Officer and the Internal Decision Maker;
- The Project is listed on the Strategic Investment Board website for '*procurement projects in the pipeline*' which alerts industry to the broad spectrum of potential projects;
- Board meetings are held quarterly with key documentation in place;
- An expert advisor had been appointed and has brought exceptional knowledge and support to the project. A Strategic Design Brief is due to be provided by the end of February 2018;
- Input will be sought from User Groups as well as taking cognisance of previous lessons learned.

In discussing the overall phases of the project including the Government Gateway Review, DAERA was content, based on discussions and expert advice, that the current timeline for completion was realistic. Ms Uhlemann informed the Board that they will regularly be updated on the project plan including delivery of milestones.

**ACTION**

In response to a question from the Board on future proofing, it was noted that a high level of flexibility will be incorporated into any new build and advice will be provided by the specialist advisor in this regard. Dr Carson also stated that part of the process of looking at strategic issues will include identifying possible synergies around areas of work that use similar platforms. The CEO also added that a joined up approach of sharing common technology platforms is a challenge for all new laboratories as evidenced by recent new builds at other research institutes.

In terms of rural proofing assessment, the initial feeling is that there will be no detrimental effects on the rural setting and a full public consultation is not expected to be required. In terms of the VSD outstation at Omagh and the need to upgrade its facilities, the CEO stated that he considered that there will always be a need for a service in the west of the province and that the Executive will consider the functions required from the outstation and report these findings to the Department in due course.

## **7. Update on DAERA Science Transformation Programme**

Dr Carson tabled a paper in relation to the DAERA Science Transformation Programme (DSTP). Recapping on the presentation given by the DAERA Permanent Secretary at the AFBI Board Strategic Workshop in June 2017, Dr Carson stated that the DSTP is being undertaken to ensure the delivery of world class science so that DAERA can effectively and efficiently deliver strategic outcomes. DAERA aims to be a data-based and science-driven Department with evidence based policy and decision making. The Board welcomed the important role of science in the delivery of the Department's strategic objectives and felt that communications should be seen as an important element of the programme.

Dr Carson then updated the Board on the following progress in 2017/18:-

- 1) Scoping Study – This documents and compares current approaches within the Department in relation to the commissioning, managing, delivering and evaluating of science requirements. The study will look at a number of comparators from different regions and is expected to be presented to the Programme Management Board by the end of March 2018.
- 2) DAERA Review of AFBI – The review is in line with Cabinet Office guidance and will be balanced, constructive and beneficial to AFBI and DAERA.
- 3) Veterinary Science Laboratory Facilities – As discussed previously the project is well established and the development of the Strategic Design Brief will allow procurement of an Integrated Consultancy Team in March/April 2018.
- 4) Establishment of Programme – Dr Carson was pleased to report that the Senior Responsible Officer had been appointed and the Head of the

Programme Management Office was also in place. Initial posts within the Management Office had also been scoped and were in progress. The Programmes will take cognisance of the scoping study findings and involve a high level of communication and stakeholder engagement.

**ACTION**

The Board thanked Dr Carson for the update and during discussions the following points were noted:-

- Estate issues will be considered as part of the DSTP process and given the extended timeline for any proposed move of AFBI HQ, the Department recognise the issue of prolonged maintenance and it was noted that the Director of FCAD is a member of a recently formed group that will consider estate maintenance management;
- Due consideration will be given to naming the new facility at VSD;
- In terms of prioritisation of science, Dr Carson informed the Board that, as part of the review of processes and structures, the Project Board will consider both R&D and Non R&D priorities. The Chair stated that it was vitally important that the process should also take into consideration the views of the Agri-Food Industry;
- Dr Carson stated that IT capability to handle big-data is a key issue that will need to be explored;
- The current timeline for the DAERA Review of AFBI suggests that it will be completed in June 2018. However Dr Carson indicated that completion of the DSTP will take in the region of seven years.

In conclusion, the Board stated that it looked forward to working closely with the DSTP Project Board through a clear two way process.

## **8. DAERA Feedback on AFBI Corporate Plan 2018-2021**

Dr Carson informed the Board that he had met a few days earlier with AFBI to discuss the Draft AFBI Corporate Plan 2018-2021 and advised that the AFBI Executive is preparing a cover paper for presentation of the plan to the DAERA Departmental Board meeting on Monday 19 February 2018.

**Exec**

At a high level there appears to be no major issues with the overall direction of travel and the CEO confirmed that AFBI is in the process of drafting its Annual Business Plan 2018/19 on this basis.

## **9. Cultural Change in AFBI - Challenges, Opportunities and a Road Map for the Future**

The Executive gave a presentation on cultural change within AFBI outlining the current initiatives aimed at strengthening staff capability to ensure AFBI embeds succession planning and career mapping to enhance the recruitment and motivation of a highly skilled workforce.

The Staff Engagement Survey conducted in November 2017 will be used as a benchmark for future surveys and the results of the survey will be shared with staff shortly. The next steps of the process were outlined as follows:-

**ACTION**

- 1) Focus Groups and an action plan will be established in relation to the staff survey with key outputs feeding into the AFBI HR Strategy;
- 2) Wider facilitated discussions including EMT Roadshows, will be held in relation to science programmes and the AFBI Corporate Plan 2018-2021;
- 3) Cultural Roadmap to be developed through further consultation and engagement. A business case has also been prepared to seek additional support to develop this strand.

In response to a query on the type of staff survey used, Mrs Campbell advised that this survey provided the Executive with a wider area of benchmarking as information on trends within the sector was also provided.

In discussing the direction and destination of cultural change including the importance of establishing the corporate message, the Executive considered that a Programme Based Approach is the right vehicle to develop a customer-focused culture that will actively manage the science portfolio. Customer feedback and enhancement of internal communications to staff will also improve services and support a culture of collaboration and multi-disciplinary innovation.

The Chair asked that discussions on the topic of culture be taken forward by the Organisational Development & Human Resources Committee at its next meeting.

**TC/  
Exec**

## **10. Non Grant-in-Aid Income – A Strategy for Growth**

The CEO gave a presentation entitled '*Non Grant-in-Aid Income – A Strategy for Growth*' which covered the background to Grant-in-aid, non-Grant-in-aid income, future projections and a future growth strategy.

In analysing the data on income sources and non-Grant-in-aid projections the CEO concluded that increasing the number and level of collaborative R&D contracts is the best avenue to boost external income. It was noted that the pursuit of such contracts needs to be in line with AFBI's Vision and Science Strategy as it is important to publish peer review papers and add value to the science undertaken in order to showcase AFBI's ability and sustain its reputation. Income generation also needs support strategies and resources and the Executive continues to put in place initiatives to rise to the challenges ahead.

The Chair asked that further discussion on the matter be taken forward by the Finance & Business Strategy Committee including how the Executive plans to evaluate success of ongoing and future projects.

**CC/  
Exec**

## **11. Closed Session**

Prior to lunch the Board met in closed session.

## 12. Ulster Farmers' Union Presidential Team and Key Office Bearers

Following a break for lunch the Board were joined by the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) Presidential Team and Key Office Bearers. The Chair warmly welcomed the UFU representatives and described the meeting as a great opportunity to engage with a key stakeholder of AFBI.

Mr Bell, President of UFU, welcomed the AFBI Board and Executive to their Headquarters on the centenary year of the UFU and provided a brief overview of the main aims of the UFU such as promoting rural health, education and transport. Each UFU representative then provided the Board with a brief overview of their background and roles within the UFU.

The Board and AFBI Executive were keen to gain an understanding of the key issues facing the UFU and its members. Detailed discussions on a number of matters including the impact of the UK exit of the EU, Tuberculosis, ammonia emissions and arable research programme took place. In discussing arable research it was brought to AFBI's attention that possible funding may be available to conduct this research. The CEO agreed to ensure that this was followed up with the appropriate AFBI staff.

CEO/EM

The UFU raised the need for more red meat research and enquired as to the progress of the beef facilities at AFBI Hillsborough. The Executive agreed that it was important to have fit for purpose facilities and recognised the need for more on-farm research, however, given AFBI estate priorities, it is unlikely that beef research facilities at Hillsborough will be upgraded in the next few years. In response to a question on where research will be based, the Executive informed the UFU of AFBI's desire to form strategic alliances with key stakeholders that will benefit the NI agri-food sector and improve opportunities for funding.

The Chair concluded the session by thanking the UFU representatives for their hospitality and giving their time to engage with the AFBI Board and Executive and that they look forward to fostering direct engagement with the UFU in the future.

## 13. Any Other Business

### 13.1 Draft Press Release – AFBI and Queen's University Belfast (QUB) Announce New Strategic Alliance

The CEO presented a draft press release for Board consideration in relation to the formation of a strategic alliance with QUB. It was also noted that the paper is to be presented to the QUB Board for consideration today. The Board was content that the press release accurately describes the ethos of the strategic alliance and, from the AFBI perspective, was content to approve it for publication at the appropriate time.

In discussing the operational detail of the strategic alliance and the ongoing work to develop a governance framework that will enhance cooperation and support the expansion of the local and global agri-food industry, the Board asked that a paper on the overall vision and timeline for implementation be presented at the next Board/Workshop.

Exec

### 13.2 AFBI Science Outlook Conference – 13 March 2018

## ACTION

The CEO reminded the AFBI Board that the AFBI Science Outlook Conference will be held at the Hilton Hotel, Templepatrick, on Tuesday 13 March 2018. Invitations to attend the event will be circulated to Board members later today.

**Exec**

**14. Date of Next AFBI Board Meeting & AFBI Board Workshop**

The next AFBI Board meeting will be held on Thursday 15 March 2018 at 10.00am in AFBI Newforge.

The next AFBI Board Workshop will be held on Tuesday 24 April 2018. The venue is to be confirmed.

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

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