

**Minutes of the Meeting of the
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) Board
held in Crossnacreevy Library and via Webex
on Thursday 17 December 2020 at 1000hrs**

Present

Mr Colin Coffey, Chairman

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, Acting Chief Executive Officer

Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division

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

Mr Pieter-Jan Schön, Director of Environment and Marine
Sciences Division

In attendance

Ms Lisa Black, Principal Scientific Officer (for item 11)

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance & Performance

Mr Conor O'Neill, Head of Finance

Mr Conor McGimpsey, Head of Health & Safety (for item 10)

Mr Shaun Henry, Head of Corporate Affairs (for item 5)

Miss Anne Williams, AFBI Secretariat (minute-taker)

Mr Charlie Thompson, AFBI Secretariat

1. Welcome and Introduction ACTION

The Chairman welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Apologies were received from Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer.

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 26 November 2020

The Board members sought clarification on whether they should be named individually in the minutes as this was not usual practice. It was agreed that usual practice would be maintained for future minutes of Board meetings. The draft minutes of the AFBI Board meeting held on 26 November 2020 were approved as an accurate reflection of the business conducted at the meeting, subject to a few minor administrative amendments.

Sec

4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 26 November 2020

The Board noted that actions from the AFBI Board meeting held on 26 November would be considered under reports and updates on the agenda.

The Board thanked the Executive at this stage for the hard work and achievement that went into producing the Annual Report and Accounts. The Chair stressed that good governance was vital within the organisation and also thanked all divisions within AFBI as well as the members of the Audit and Risk Committee for their hard work which contributed to AFBI receiving an unqualified audit certificate in respect of the Annual Report and Accounts.

5. Brexit

Mr Henry presented the Brexit paper, which had been previously reviewed by the Science Strategy Committee, highlighting the potential impact of the end of the transition arrangements between the EU and UK on the 31st December 2020. In summary he advised that overall, the immediate and short term risks are low. He highlighted that the cross border INTERREG VA programme is the largest contributor of EU funds to the AFBI budget. All existing letters of offer will be honoured in full and there will be no impact on planned income.

He set out that In the medium term, over the next 2-3 years, there may be a potential dip in funding for 6-18 months for the INTERREG programme and future funding will be more competitive;

Mr Henry also highlighted that any existing Horizon 2020 projects will be honoured in full but the position going forward is unclear and it may be very challenging to sustain the current high level of funding;

The Board agreed that the paper was very helpful and a discussion took place on the need for a clear strategy for future funding going forward. This included maximising all potential sources of funding including that brought

through the collaboration with QUB and alignment with DAERA's 'Green Growth' Strategy;

In respect of access to funding from Innovate UK, Dr Magowan advised the Board that progress on this had been presented at the last Science Strategy Committee. The possibility of applying to be a PSRE (Public Sector Research Establishment) for UKRI researching funding was discussed and the Board noted that this was not a straight forward process to achieve.

6. Covid-19 Progress Update

Mrs Kelly advised the Board that the Corporate Incident Management Team (CIMT) had met the previous day. She noted that AFBI were now in new ways of working with a mixture of staff working from home and others working on AFBI sites. She noted the possibility of potential additional public health restrictions in January and advised the Board that the situation is continuously monitored.

The Board discussed the need for individual risk assessments for people working at home and Mrs Kelly noted that these had been carried out before the Summer and agreed that a review process would be put in place.

CMcG

Dr Douglas then updated the Board in respect of Covid-19 testing. It was noted that the current expenditure was approximately £900k and AFBI had secured funding for up to £2m, if required. He reassured the Board that AFBI had staff capacity at present to test the numbers of samples being received. Dr Douglas gave the Board an update in relation to the SLA's with the Belfast Trust and the South Eastern Trust and advised that AFBI had linked up with QUB staff in relation to the reporting process. The Board asked Dr Douglas if he had any concerns in relation to under reporting as had been the case in Wales and Dr Douglas advised that he did not foresee any issues.

7. Finance Update Report

Mr O'Neill presented the Finance Update Report to the Board. He highlighted that the Comptroller & Auditor General issued an unqualified audit certificate in relation to AFBI's 2019-20 Annual Report and Accounts on 30 November 2020 and these were subsequently laid electronically by DAERA at the NI Assembly on 9 December 2020.

He outlined 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.

He advised that the internal AFBI budget setting exercise for the next financial year was underway.

In respect of AFBI's Covid-19 testing programme, he outlined that the DAERA Minister had secured £2m funding from the Department of Health to cover AFBI's 2020/21 testing costs and this figure would be included in AFBI's January Monitoring Round outcome.

Mr O'Neill further advised in respect of the ongoing royalty income issue, that one of the vaccine companies had provided some backdated sales reports allowing QUB to invoice for these and if this is paid to QUB, AFBI will receive their entitled percentage share.

The Board noted the paper and discussed the future approaches to funding with E&I and DRF and whether the current funding model was fit for the future. Mrs Kelly advised the Board that the funding models would be reviewed through the Science Strategy Framework and the AFBI Review. Dr Magowan further advised that it may take 6-9 months to see the out workings of the Science Strategy Framework.

8. Governance

8.1 Risk Management

No new or emerging risks were reported.

8.2 Honorary Research Associate – Clarification paper

Following consideration of the clarifications provided by the Executive, the Board approved the Honorary Status Policy.

9. Fraud

9.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

There were no reports of new or ongoing cases.

10. Health & Safety

Mr McGimpsey presented the Health & Safety Update Report. He advised that his unit had undertaken Covid-19 inspections which highlighted staff compliance with the restrictions and associated mitigation measures.

Mr McGimpsey then discussed the RIDDOR report and provided the Board with an update on the most recent incident. He noted that some improvements were needed in signalling training and that these were in motion.

The Chair thanked Mr McGimpsey and his team for their exceptional and professional work throughout this challenging year.

LUNCH

11. InnoVar Project (Presentation)

Dr Lisa Black took the Board through a presentation in relation to the InnoVar project which focused on the following topics:

- The challenges – population, decrease in inputs and climate change;
- The answer – varieties and variety testing systems;
- DUS and VCU testing;
- 2018 EC Call proposals on innovations in variety testing;
- How new varieties are tested;
- Focus on wheat as the test crop;
- The project structure;
- The technologies used;
- Potential trial sites;
- What InnoVar will achieve; and
- What InnoVar will bring to AFBI and NI.

The Board thanked Dr Black for a very interesting presentation and the work undertaken on the project.

12. Executive Report

Mrs Kelly took the Board through the Executive Report highlighting the following points:

- AFBI's ISO9001 external audit has been completed with good results and successful re-certification;
- In relation to the MarPAMM Project, a meeting was due to take place following the Board meeting to discuss the best option going forward and further information would be provided following the next Oversight and Governance Committee in January 2021;

- The Chair had attended the staff road show in early December which was deemed a success as excellent feedback was received from staff. The Board suggested that it might be an idea to include other Board members at future staff road shows to enhance the visibility of the Board;
- A virtual charity coffee morning had taken place and this was very successful raising approximately £1,200 to date;
- Mr Montgomery advised the Board that an exercise was currently underway to review the AFBI website and stakeholder responses were due by mid-January;
- In relation to the final outturn for 2019/20 for the Directed Research Fund (DRF), it was noted that the Executive had made final changes following review and the report along with the letter regarding the allocation level will issue to DAERA later in the week;

13. Board Sub-Committees

13.1 Minutes of Board Sub-Committees

13.1.1 Report of the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 7 December 2020

The Chair of the Committee provided a verbal update in relation to the meeting and advised the following:

- The Brexit impact paper was welcomed by the Committee;
- Progress in relation to the science KPI's was considered;
- The DAERA presentation and the AFBI science strategy presentation was welcomed.

13.1.2 Report of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 8 December 2020

The Committee Chair provided a verbal update in relation to the meeting. After discussion, the Board agreed that they should hold a half-day session with all members to consider aspects such as the Board culture and ways to allow the Board and Sub-Committees to become more strategically focussed and effective at conducting its business; including clarifying the Board and Executive roles and responsibilities. It was agreed that Mrs Kelly would liaise with the Chair to identify potential dates in January or February 2021 to facilitate this session if Covid-19 restrictions allowed.

**JK/
Chair**

14. Chair's Remarks

The Chair took the opportunity to mark the retirement of Mr Buchanan and Mrs McKeague from the AFBI Board and thanked them both for their diligent, professional and competent work throughout their five years of service. The Chair noted that there had been a considerable transformation within AFBI during this time. Mr Buchanan and Mrs McKeague thanked everyone and agreed that there had been a positive transformation in AFBI.

The Chair reported that he had a good discussion with Mr Brian Doherty, DAERA Deputy Permanent Secretary at their recent meeting and he highlighted that DAERA was pleased with AFBI's overall progress and the direction of travel of the AFBI Science Strategy.

The Chair also advised that AFBI had hosted a positive meeting with Invest NI at Hillsborough and reminded the Executive to be aware of anticipated forthcoming public sector budgetary pressures and any risks these may pose to AFBI.

15. AOB

The Chair advised that, dependent on the public health advice in place at the time, the Board would meet in January either in person or continue on a virtual basis.

16. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content that the meeting had been effective and the Chair wished everyone a very Happy Christmas and New Year.

17. Date of next meeting

The next meeting of the AFBI Board is scheduled to take place on Thursday 28 January 2021.