

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)
Board Meeting held in the Boardroom, AFBI Newforge and virtually
on Tuesday 1 October 2024 at 10.00hrs**

Board Members

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair
Mr Martyn Blair
Mr David Campbell
Mrs Daphne Johnston
Mr Tim McClelland
Mr Bill Montgomery

Mr Alan Moore
Mr Ian Murphy
Ms Therese Rafferty
Prof Sally Shortall
Mr Tom Tynan
Mr Tom Wright

AFBI Executive

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer
Prof Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division
Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division
Mr Pieter-Jan Schön, Director of Environment and Marine Sciences Division

In Attendance

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance
Mr Conor O'Neill, Head of Finance (item 8)
Mr James Adams, AFBI Secretariat

Observer

Prof Grace Mulcahy

1. Welcome and Introduction

ACTION

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting especially Prof Grace Mulcahy who was attending as an observer prior to commencing her Term of Office as the AFBI Chair on 1 November 2024.

2. Apologies

There were no apologies to record.

3. Conflicts of Interest Declaration

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

4. Draft Minutes of AFBI Board Meeting held on 27 August 2024

The draft minutes of the Board Meeting held on 27 August 2024 were accepted as accurate and a fair representation of the meeting.

In terms of a comment raised by Mr Wright on engaging Internal Audit around the Key Performance Indicator process, the Chair requested that this be discussed at the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC).

TW

Mr Campbell entered the meeting

4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 27 August 2024

The Board noted that the majority of actions as per the Action Sheet had been completed . On the action around the Board concerns over the knowledge transfer elements of the Soils Nutrient Health Scheme, the Chair asked Mr Schön to provide Mr Montgomery with an update on the current position as soon as possible so that the draft letter can be finalised and issued to the DAERA Minister.

PJS

5. Board Sub-Committees

5.1 Report of the Oversight and Governance Meeting on 26 September 2024

Mr Moore informed the Board that the Oversight and Governance Committee had reviewed the report on large and complex projects at the meeting. The meeting also included a presentation on the progress of the Animal Health Science Building from the DAERA Project Sponsor.

6. Governance Issues

6.1 Risk Management

6.1.1 *Reports of New or Emerging Risks*

There were no new or emerging risks to report.

AFBI's Risk Review Group (RRG) is due to meet shortly to review the current risk environment and an updated position will be reported to the ARAC and Board in due course.

6.2 Fraud and Raising Concerns

6.2.1 *Reports of new or Ongoing Cases*

Mr Montgomery informed the Board that he had just been made aware of a potential raising concern case. AFBI is attempting to gather more information and due process will be followed.

There were no new cases of potential or suspected fraud to report and the progress in relation to two ongoing cases was noted by the Board.

On enhancing staff awareness on the Fraud and Raising Concerns process, Mr Montgomery informed the Board that the subject had been included in a recent staff webinar as part of the familiarisation roll out.

6.3 DAERA Review of AFBI

Mr Montgomery advised that following a desktop review by the appointed consultants, a number of meetings have been scheduled with internal stakeholders and AFBI has fed back information on key external stakeholders who the review team may wish to reach out to. The review is currently on schedule to be completed by the end of the calendar year.

The Chair informed the Board that he had held his consultation with the Review Team which covered a wide range of questions and afforded him the opportunity to outline the excellent work of AFBI and how operations could be enhanced.

7. Health & Safety Update

The CEO provided the Board with an update following the previously reported inspections undertaken by the Health & Safety Executive NI (HSENI). Findings from the inspection at AFBI Hillsborough had largely been addressed with no major issues identified. A detailed response has been issued to HSENI in relation to the AFBI Stormont inspection and several actions have been taken. Liaison is also ongoing with DAERA in terms of matters raised that relate to the AFBI Estate.

8. Finance & Business

8.1 Finance Update Report

Mr O'Neill presented the Finance paper and the following was noted:

2023-24 Annual Report and Accounts

Management response to the draft Report to those charged with Governance (RTTCWG) has been prepared and will be forwarded to the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) to facilitate closure of the 2023-24 audit. A final RTTCWG is expected to be presented at the next ARAC meeting in October 2024.

2024-25 Budget Update

In relation to the projected outturn, as the outcome of the October Monitoring Round is awaited, variance between the June and October Monitoring Rounds are shown. The return submitted by AFBI to the October Monitoring Round included resource and capital bids. The former included an element in respect of the AFBI lease.

AFBI's capital investment plans will be reassessed once the outcome of the October Monitoring Round is received and if the available budget is insufficient, plans will be reviewed to ensure a balanced budget is achieved by year end. The Executive stated that it is currently content with the projections around the Research Vessel (RV) Replacement and that some spend in relation to Green Growth is still anticipated. It was noted that priority items of recurrent capital were being progressed.

Budget 2025-26 Information Gathering Exercise

DAERA commissioned the Budget 2025-26 Information Gathering Exercise and it was noted that the NI Executive will only be able to set a one-year budget as the Chancellor will only announce the Spending Review outcome for 2025-26. However, at the request of Department of Finance (DoF), information was requested for 2026-27 and 2027-28 to enable consideration of longer-term implications of any spending decisions.

AFBI submitted a return in September 2024 which was based upon the existing known income and spend profiles adjusted for annual inflationary uplifts on income, staff and non-staff costs. Capital expenditure plans were included in the exercise but NI Protocol requirements were not and will form part of a separate DoF exercise.

The complexity and diversity of current funding streams and the need to ensure capacity to carry out core DAERA work as well as the need to respond to funding calls was discussed. Mr O'Neill advised that there had been a reasonably consistent baseline of external work over recent years and the CEO noted some major new funding opportunities that will open for proposals in the next few years.

8.2 Out of Contract Expenditure

Mr O'Neill updated the Board on progress relating to a recent situation that resulted in 'out of contract' expenditure and noted that AFBI was continuing to liaise closely with DAERA on the issue.

The Board was assured that a number of actions have been and are planned to be taken to reduce the potential for reoccurrence. Mr Wright requested that further detail on the matter, and the responses undertaken, be discussed at the next Audit & Risk Assurance Committee.

CO'N

9. Executive Report

A number of points within the Executive Report were highlighted including a number of staff engagement initiatives, the award of Irish National Accreditation Board (INAB) accreditation and AFBI submissions to the first call under the European Partnership for Animal Health and Welfare (EU-PAHW).

On the Ruminant Research Emissions Facility (RERF) Project, Prof Magowan advised that since the production of the report, AFBI had received notification that planning permission had been granted and the project will move to the next phase. While the project is progressing well, the key risk of budget availability remains. Prof Magowan also advised that she has been keeping key stakeholders informed of progress.

There was also conversation around the Science Commissioning Policy that has been proposed by DAERA through their Science Strategy delivery process. A key aspect of the proposed Policy includes a categorisation framework and AFBI will be seeking further clarification on a number of aspects from DAERA.

CEO/EM

10. SAFSD Branch Restructuring

The Board noted the paper on the recent restructuring within SAFSD.

In response to a question on staff response, Prof Magowan stated that the changes had been well received and that a lot of communication and consultation took place during the preparation phase.

11. Chair's Remarks

The Chair referred to the recent resignation of the Deputy Chair, Mrs Roberta Brownlee. He thanked Mrs Brownlee for her professionalism, knowledge and commitment during her time as both a Board member and Deputy Chair. The Chair also noted the huge contribution to AFBI during her tenure and the valuable advice and support provided to him. The Board and Executive concurred with the Chair and it was agreed that a letter would be issued to Mrs Brownlee to thank her for her work and dedication to the organisation.

CC

As this was his last Board meeting as the AFBI Chair before completing his term of office on 31 October 2024, Mr Coffey said that it had been an honour to be a member of the AFBI Board over a nine and a half year period. He described AFBI as an excellent organisation that continues to deliver excellent science and adapt to meet the changing needs of NI in terms of agriculture, climate change and sustainability. He hoped that AFBI would continue to go from strength

to strength and wished the Board and Executive the very best for the future.

The Board and Executive thanked Mr Coffey for his sterling contribution to AFBI during his time as a Board member, Deputy Chair and Chair. The CEO noted the many changes in the organisation over the period that Colin had been on the Board and some of the challenges faced, and thanked the Chair for his dedication and contribution to AFBI over that time. Everyone wished Colin every success for the future.

12. Any Other Business

12.1 DAERA/AFBI Joint Board Meeting

Mr Montgomery informed the Board that the DAERA/AFBI Joint Board Meeting is potentially to be held in February 2025. Potential dates for consideration will be circulated shortly.

Sec

13. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content the meeting had been effective.

14. Date of Next Meeting

The next AFBI Board Meeting will be held on Thursday 7 November 2024.