

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)  
Board Meeting held in the Boardroom, AFBI Newforge  
on Thursday 12 December 2024 at 10.00hrs**

**Board Members**

Prof Grace Mulcahy, Chair	Mr Alan Moore
Mr Martyn Blair	Ms Therese Rafferty
Mrs Daphne Johnston	Mr Tom Tynan
Mr Tim McClelland	Mr Tom Wright
Mr Bill Montgomery	

**AFBI Executive**

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer  
Prof Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division (SAFSD)  
Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division (VSD)  
Ms Nuala McAuley, Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs Division (FCAD)  
Mr Ivor Johnston, Interim Director of FCAD

**In Attendance**

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance  
Mrs Fiona Campbell, Head of AFBI People & Culture Branch (Item 9)  
Mr James Adams, AFBI Secretariat

**Visitors**

Mr Colin Coffey (Item 10)  
Ms Katrina Godfrey, DAERA Permanent Secretary (Item 10)  
Ms Francine Manikpure, Head of DAERA's AFBI Sponsor Branch (Item 10)

**1. Welcome and Introduction**

**ACTION**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting, especially Ms McAuley who was attending her first meeting of the AFBI Board following her recent appointment as the Director of FCAD. The Chair wished Ms McAuley well in her new role and also noted the attendance of Mr Johnston as part of a handover process to the new Director.

The Chair referred to the two key strategic items on the agenda and that there would be a recognition of the service of the previous Chair, Mr Coffey, later in the meeting. On the three previous Board members who completed their Term of Office on 30 November 2024, an opportunity to recognise their contributions will be arranged at a later date.

## **2. Apologies**

An apology was received on behalf of Mr Pieter-Jan Schön, Director of Environment and Marine Sciences Division.

## **3. Conflicts of Interest Declaration**

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

## **4. Draft Minutes of AFBI Board Meeting held on 7 November 2024**

The draft minutes of the Board Meeting held on 7 November 2024 were accepted as accurate and a fair representation of the meeting subject to one edit under any other business given Mr Tynan's acceptance of an extended Term of Office.

**Sec**

### **4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 1 October 2024**

The Board noted that the actions as per the Action Sheet had been completed or formed part of the agenda.

## **5. Board Sub-Committees**

### **5.1 Report of the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 16 October 2024**

The Committee noted the draft minutes from the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 16 October 2024.

Mr McClelland also gave a brief update on the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme (SNHS) training events being provided by CAFRE.

### **5.2 Report of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 23 October 2024**

The Committee noted the draft minutes from the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 23 October 2024.

### **5.3** Report of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 29 October 2024

The Committee noted the draft minutes from the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 29 October 2024.

Mr Wright also touched on a recent meeting of DAERA Arm's Length Bodies Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Chairs where he noted common themes on key issues such as staffing risks and implementation of outstanding audit recommendations. He also advised that the DAERA Permanent Secretary had provided a brief update on the potential budget position for the remainder of the Comprehensive Spending Review period.

Prof Mulcahy mentioned that the Northern Ireland Audit Office had recently published the '*Comptroller and Auditor General's Report on Financial Audit Findings 2024 - Central Government*'. A copy will be circulated to Board members for information.

**Sec**

## **6. Governance Issues**

### **6.1** Risk Management

#### **6.1.1** *Reports of New or Emerging Risks*

Mr Montgomery reported that there were no new or emerging risks to report. AFBI's Risk Review Group will meet in the new year for the quarterly review of the AFBI Corporate Risk Register.

### **6.2** Fraud and Raising Concerns

#### **6.2.1** *Reports of new or Ongoing Cases*

Mr Montgomery presented the paper on Fraud and Raising Concerns and highlighted that one new raising concerns case had been brought to the Executive's attention since the previous Board meeting in November 2024.

The case was raised anonymously and will be investigated through due process as per AFBI policy and guidance and the results, and any potential lessons learned, will be shared with DAERA.

It was noted that there were no new cases of suspected or potential fraud.

## **7. Health & Safety Update**

Mr Johnston presented the Health & Safety Update.

There were no RIDDOR reportable incidents and Mr Johnston highlighted some ongoing communication activities such as the Health & Safety Workshop at AFBI Hillsborough. This workshop involved staff from all sites and focused on key messages such as the importance of accident and near-miss reporting. Increased reporting would suggest that its importance was being recognized.

Mr Wright mentioned internal Health & Safety Audits around first-aid and the Executive confirmed that findings and classifications are to be reviewed by EMT before inclusion in a future final Health & Safety report.

## **8. Finance & Business**

### **8.1 Finance Update Report**

Ms McAuley presented the Finance Update paper and highlighted the following:

#### 2024-25 Budget Update

The outcome of the January Monitoring Round is awaited but AFBI is forecasting a balanced budget. Requests made during the realignment exercise have been agreed apart from depreciation which is expected to be agreed later in the process.

#### Capital Update

Procurement of assets which have been allocated funding is ongoing. It was also noted that there is a reserve capital list which can be utilised should there be any slippage of approved items.

The main element of the systems capital relates to the new Finance system. It was noted that the Business Case had been approved in writing by the Department of Finance (DoF) on 4 December 2024. A significant amount of preparation work is continuing to meet the onboarding process to Account NI (ANI). Communications to staff and particularly those directly affected by the changes is being finalised and is expected to be rolled out shortly.

The Board asked if there were any concerns with the onboarding timeframe and the audit of the 2024-25 Annual Report and Accounts. The Executive confirmed that separate teams will be taking forward each of these elements and the Project Lead for onboarding to ANI is front loading any work that could potentially impinge on the delivery of the 2024-25 Annual Report and Accounts.

On the replacement of the Research Vessel (RV), the Board asked if images could be provided to them in the future to show key progress with the RV build, and the CEO undertook to follow up on this

**CEO**

On the subject of Green Growth, Prof Magowan updated the Board on the position in relation to the development of related green growth business cases. One business case has been submitted to DAERA for consideration. Work on three other business cases is ongoing and will be at the same approval level. The remaining business case will require casework committee review given the level of spend. Capacity of project leaders to draft documentation for inclusion has been an issue in terms of the time taken to produce business cases. Prof Magowan explained that while some challenges still remain, she is confident of timely delivery in relation to the remaining business cases. Board members were keen that the production of these business cases be prioritised.

#### Procurement and Contract Management

Ms McAuley informed the Board of new procurement legislation that is being led by DoF. This will have significant impacts on contract management including the need to set contract key performance indicators. A meeting is to be set up with Construction and Procurement Delivery (CPD) and it was noted that onboarding to ANI will give good visibility and tools in relation to contract management.

## 9. Staff Engagement / Staff Survey Results

The Board welcomed Mrs Campbell to the meeting to give a presentation on the results of the 2024 AFBI People Survey.

The Board had been provided with the full results of the survey carried out by NISRA and Mrs Campbell highlighted some of the key components. Overall, the scores had improved across most areas since the previous survey in 2021. It was noted in particular that the overall Employee Engagement Index (EEI) score, which is based on 5 key questions, had increased by 3% since 2021. This is regarded as a positive outcome particularly given the on-going pay challenges across the NICS.

Mrs Campbell then outlined the benchmarking of results by Directorate and grade, pointing out the highest and lowest areas in terms of scoring. The CEO noted the variability in scores across different branches and the importance of the role played by Heads of Branch and line managers. A number of efforts are being made with the Executive putting increased focus on staff engagement with seminars and roadshows taking place on a regular basis. There have also been a number of Health & Wellbeing initiatives and Mental Health First Aiders are continuing to provide a confidential service to staff as and when required. It was noted that support is also in place to Mental Health First Aiders.

Pay and grading carried the lowest scores and it was noted that this is being examined in conjunction with Recruitment & Retention review and is on the radar of the Board's Organisational Development & Human Resources (ODHR) Committee. The Board welcomed the changes made by AFBI to their Assistance to Study Scheme which provides support to staff seeking to undertake additional learning outside of work.

Dr Douglas and Prof Magowan also provided updates from their respective divisions of staff engagement initiatives such as 'Townhall' meetings at VSD and staff drop-in sessions at AFBI Hillsborough. The CEO also noted the variability in scores across different branches and the importance of the role played by Heads of Branch and line managers.

Mrs Campbell concluded the presentation by outlining the next steps, including the need to ensure that communications reach all levels of AFBI so that staff are aware that their views have been listened to and senior management are taking action as a result.

The Board thanked Mrs Campbell for her detailed and clear presentation and welcomed the ongoing efforts of the Executive around staff engagement and the development of a new People Strategy. There was agreement that the development and implementation of this strategy will be pivotal in the success of AFBI.

## **10. Recognition of Previous Board Members**

The Board welcomed Mr Coffey, Ms Godfrey and Ms Manikpure to the meeting.

The CEO gave a brief synopsis of key timelines and events during Mr Coffey's time on the AFBI Board and thanked him for his dedication and commitment through his roles as a Board member, Deputy Chair and Chair of the AFBI Board.

Mr Coffey thanked the Executive and Board colleagues for their kind words, advice and support. He said that it had been a great honour to serve on the Board of AFBI and he wished everyone every success for the future and that he is confident that AFBI will continue to deliver great science to meet current and future challenges.

Ms Godfrey recalled her first interaction with Mr Coffey and the Board at the AFBI Board Workshop in October 2022 shortly after her appointment as DAERA Permanent Secretary and on behalf of herself and DAERA senior colleagues thanked Mr Coffey for his service and valued contribution to AFBI.

All attendees wished Mr Coffey every success for the future.

## **11. Update on DAERA Draft Science Commissioning Policy**

The Executive provided a number of papers in relation to the DAERA Science Strategy Framework 2020-2035 including the draft DAERA Science Commissioning Policy and associated Categorisation Framework. A presentation was also given to explain the background to the proposals, current arrangements, areas of concern and AFBI's

view of the need for partnership working with DAERA on how monitoring & surveillance and research & development work programs are developed, agreed and delivered. It was noted that AFBI concerns have been raised with DAERA and that clarification from DAERA's Chief Scientific Advisor (CSA) had been requested in writing

There followed a detailed discussion including potential scenarios and proposed next steps. The Chair informed the Board that she would be meeting with the DAERA CSA and Mrs Teague, Head of Climate Change and Science Innovation Group, later in the week. Further to this, and taking account of discussions, and the pending report on the DAERA commissioned Review of AFBI, she would consider the proposal to invite the CSA and Mrs Teague to the next Board meeting on 6 February 2025.

**Chair**

## **12. Executive Report**

The CEO presented the Executive report and highlighted some key points around the DAERA Directed AFBI Evidence & Innovation (E&I) Programme, the agreement of contracts for AFBI's participation in the two Ireland-UK Co-Centres and the recent visit of the DAERA Minister to AFBI Stormont which was also attended by the Chair. The Board were also updated in relation to the Defra Dairy Demonstrator Project.

The Board noted the comprehensive report.

## **13. Chair's Remarks**

The Chair informed the Board that she and the DAERA Permanent Secretary had met with the lead consultant undertaking the DAERA commissioned Review of AFBI. While no presentation of the draft report was provided, a number of key themes were discussed and the Chair outlined these to the Board.

A draft report is expected to be provided to the Executive for review of factual accuracy shortly. Following finalisation of the report, the lead consultant has offered to present the final report to the Board.

## **14. Any Other Business**

### **14.1 Grass Breeding Contract**



Prof Magowan informed the Board of the outcome of recent discussions with the commercial grass breeding partner and that it is planned to release a joint press statement shortly.

#### **14.2** Membership of Sub-Committees

There was a brief discussion on potential restructuring of the membership of the AFBI Board's five Committees given the recent reduction in Board membership. All changes need to be in line with the Board's Standing Orders and Committee Terms of Reference and will be finalised outside of the meeting.

Mr Blair requested that the minutes reflect the remaining Board Members disappointment with the timing of the decision in relation to the three Members whose term of office ended on 30 November 2024.

#### **14.3** Staff Recognition

It was noted that Mr Johnston would be leaving AFBI shortly having been in post as Interim Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs for two separate periods since September 2022.

The Board thanked him for his sterling work particularly in handling the issues arising from the finance system upgrade in 2022 and the preparatory work associated with the faster closing process of the Annual Report and Accounts for 2024. The Board and the Executive wished him every success for the future.

The CEO also informed the Board that Mr Adams would be leaving his post within the AFBI Secretariat and Board members thanked him for his excellent service and wished him every success in his new role.

### **15. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness**

The Board was content that the meeting had been effective.

### **16. Date of Next Meeting**

The next AFBI Board Meeting will be held on Thursday 6 February 2025.

