

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)
Board Meeting held in the Boardroom, AFBI Newforge and virtually
on Wednesday 24 April 2024 at 9.30hrs**

Board Members

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair	Mr Ian Murphy
Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Deputy Chair	Mr Tim McClelland
Mr Martyn Blair	Ms Therese Rafferty
Mr David Campbell	Prof Sally Shortall
Mrs Daphne Johnston	Mr Tom Tynan
Mr Alan Moore	Mr Tom Wright

Boardroom Apprentice

Ms Laura Ferguson

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)
Ms Jenni Burrows, AFBI Digital, Data and Technology Project Lead
Mr James Adams, AFBI Secretariat

Observer

Mr Terri McGonigal, Interim Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs Division

1. Welcome and Introduction

ACTION

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting in particular Ms Burrows and Mr McGonigal who was attending his first meeting as an observer before taking up the Interim Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs post next week.

2. Apologies

An apology was received on behalf of AFBI Board member, Mr Bill Montgomery.

3. Conflicts of Interest Declaration

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

4. Draft Minutes of AFBI Board Meeting held on 7 March 2024

The draft minutes of the Board Meeting held on 7 March 2024 were accepted as accurate and a fair representation of the meeting.

4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 7 March 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 20 February 2024

In noting the draft minutes of the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 20 February 2024, the Chair asked the wording of one paragraph to be clarified before they are presented at the next Committee for approval.

Exec

5.2 Report of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 21 February 2024

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 21 February 2024.

5.3 Report of the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting held on 28 March 2024

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting held on 28 March 2024. Mr Moore described the

meeting as comprehensive with detailed updates provided on a number of large projects.

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.

6.1.2 *Risk Management Workshop*

Mr Montgomery informed the Board that the Executive undertook a 'blank page' review of the risk environment in early April. The fresh review identified similar key risks as had been included within the previous risk register but has led to some proposed changes to the narrative and scoring.

A draft report on risk will be presented to the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee for consideration on 30 April 2024.

Exec

6.2 Fraud and Raising Concerns

6.2.1 *Reports of new or Ongoing Cases*

Mr Montgomery presented the report on Fraud and Raising Concerns which was noted by the Board.

In relation to the framework in place for Raising Concerns, it was noted that this will be discussed at the next Organisational Development & Human Resources Committee in May 2024.

6.3 AFBI Business Plan 2024-25 – Draft

In presenting the draft AFBI Business Plan 2024-25, the CEO noted that further updating of aspects of the narrative was still required to reflect the changing external environment and key challenges.

In relation to some queries on the wording of the KPIs, it was noted that those relating to work for DAERA will be measured through delivery of the Assigned Work Programme and Scientific Services.

Under '*Enhancing the Natural and Marine Environment*' it was noted that AFBI's KPI relating to Lough Neagh will focus on the delivery of a proposal for a science program in relation to catchment sciences.

6.4 DAERA Review of AFBI – Draft Terms of Reference

Mr Montgomery presented a paper on the Public Body Review of AFBI which is to be commissioned by DAERA for completion in 2024-25. AFBI Sponsor Branch have developed a draft ToR for the forthcoming assessment and this is included at Annex A.

The key purpose of the Review is to ensure that AFBI's functions remain useful and necessary and part of the review will include an assessment of the relevance of the previous recommendations from the 2018 review.

In response to a query on the Review being undertaken externally, Mr Montgomery advised that there will be a specification to include skills required as part of the public procurement exercise.

The Chair felt that further Board discussion on the matter was required once the timeline of the review had been established.

7. Health & Safety Update

In noting the Health & Safety paper the Board were concerned by the comments that managers in AFBI were over relying on the Health and Safety framework and were not fully recognising their own roles and responsibilities. The Board sought assurance from the Executive that managers are fully aware of and accept their own responsibilities in relation to Health and Safety. The CEO asked that he be allowed to come back to the Board on this issue.

CEO

The Board further asked for further updates on adherence to risk assessments and any information on the drop off in near miss reporting in 2023-24.

Dr Douglas also provided the Board with detail on one particular incident. It was deemed low risk but important that it was highlighted and as a result a more robust procedure is now in place.

Prof Magowan joined the meeting

8. Finance & Business

8.1 Finance Update Report

Mr O'Neill presented the Finance paper and referred to the following key areas:

AFBI Budget 2023-24

AFBI submitted its 2023-24 Provisional Outturn to DAERA with spend being within the required tolerances of the final budget allocation. The Board also noted the reasons for variances since the Third Monitoring Round Outcome. Feed back on the Provisional Outturn is awaited from DAERA.

AFBI Budget 2024-25

The Board noted that the NI Executive is due to meet this week to discuss the allocation of 2024-25 budgets. Mr O'Neill summarised AFBI's capital bid requests including those that were inescapable or high priority. The potential impacts on the delivery of work programs should bids not be met were discussed.

The Board also discussed the potential funding gaps that may arise depending on AFBI's resource allocation and the resource implications arising from the recent pay agreements. It was noted that some of the pressures may be partially mitigated by non-core funding streams and alleviate a portion but not all of resource funding gap. The Chair stated that it will be vital to understand the potential impacts of any funding gap and the effects this may have on delivering on the AFBI Corporate Plan 2023-2027.

2023-24 AFBI Annual Report and Accounts

AFBI have held initial planning meetings with the Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) regarding their audit of the 2023-24 AFBI Annual Report and Accounts. AFBI has also submitted its consolidation pack to DAERA by the requested deadline as part of the Review of Financial Processes (RoFP).

The draft 2023-24 AFBI Annual Report and Accounts are scheduled to be submitted to ARAC at their meeting on 30 April 2024. At this meeting the NIAO will also be presenting their Audit Strategy and are due to commence fieldwork on the 1 May 2024. A project management approach is being undertaken to ensure the Annual Report and Accounts are prepared, audited and laid in the Assembly in line with faster close deadline.

9. Executive Report

The CEO presented the Executive Report and highlighted a number of points including the following:

- An event was held to recognise current and former employees who have served 40 years and above with AFBI and predecessor organisations. Mrs Johnston attended on behalf of the Board and complemented the Executive on an excellent event.
- Following Board and Committee input, the Science Directors are working to finalise AFBI's Science Strategy.
- A Schools' Open Day was held on 7 March at AFBI Hillsborough.
- A webinar on Lough Neagh attracted significant interest with over 200 online attendees.
- Workshops have been held for senior staff on AFBI's Project Portfolio Management (PPM) System. Data enrichment of the system is ongoing and requires significant input.
- Prof Magowan is to attend a second meeting of the NI Diamond concept.

The CEO also highlighted a number of upcoming events including the Balmoral Show, AFBI Hillsborough Open Days in June 2024 and a potential Lough Neagh Conference with the date to be confirmed.

10. Update from Directors

Each Director provided a brief synopsis of matters relating to their respective divisions. Key updates included the progress on Irish National Accreditation Body (INAB) accreditation, an update on the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme (SNHS) and meetings with College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) and the NI Diamond concept.

The Chair referred to a recent meeting which he and members of the Executive attended with the CAFRE Director to discuss knowledge exchange aspects of the SNHS. The Chair advised that he had relayed the Boards concerns in relation to the effectiveness of the Knowledge Transfer elements of the SNHS. While this part of the project was the responsibility of CAFRE, the ability to meet the project objectives and install behavioural change around nutrient management are dependent on the successful delivery of the knowledge exchange programme. Not achieving the desired project outcomes pose a significant reputational risk to AFBI.

The Chair noted that the CAFRE Director had agreed to raise these concerns at the next meeting of the SNHS Program Board with a view to see if the Program Board were content with the knowledge transfer process and whether any changes should be made. The Chair advised that he had requested a response to AFBI's concerns and as a result he had requested that the Director of EMSD to keep him updated following the meeting of the Program Board.

**Dir
EMSD**

11. Ruminant Emissions - Presentation

Prof Magowan provided the Board with a presentation on the Ruminant Emissions Research Facility and how such work sits with AFBI's objectives to develop solutions to reduce the environmental impact of livestock farming.

The profile of greenhouse gases emissions from agriculture and the impact of ammonia levels within NI were outlined. The target reductions for a number of sectors in order to achieve 'Net Zero' by 2050 was also highlighted.

Prof Magowan described the strategic need for the Ruminant Emissions Research Facility and how this will provide a gaseous emissions monitoring research facility which would generate high quality data, assist in decreasing ammonia and methane emissions from cattle and support DAERA and CAFRE in terms of policy guidance and advice to farmers.

Prof Magowan concluded the presentation by outlining the governance steps to be taken and the potential timeline for the project from Outline Business Case submission to target completion date.

Following a short question and answer session, the Board thanked Prof Magowan for the informative presentation.

Mrs Brownlee left the meeting

Mr Campbell left the meeting

12. Digital, Data and Technology Review

The CEO outlined the background to the Review and the engagement of the Strategic Investment Board (SIB) to provide specialist technical support re AFBI's Digital, Data and Technology (DDaT) requirements.

Ms Burrows provided the Board with a brief overview of her initial thoughts as part of the work undertaken to date. Matters such as the need to develop AFBI's Data Strategy, enhance the PPM system, modernisation of corporate systems and associated training for staff to fully utilise systems and software were highlighted. Such a programme of work is likely to be multi-year and require adequate funding to deliver on the increasing volumes of data and analysis within the work which AFBI undertakes.

The Board thanked Ms Burrows for the synopsis and agreed that she should provide a further update later in the year. They also requested that a position paper on what the future landscape of AFBI systems will look like be brought to the Board. This should outline the timelines for the implementation of LIMS, FBMS and CORA etc and any associated risks.

JB/Exec

The CEO also informed the Board that Ms Burrows had agreed to be the SRO for the CORA and Finance & Business Management Systems (FBMS) projects in the short term.

13. Chair's Remarks

The Chair informed the Board that he and the CEO had attended an initial meeting with the DAERA Minister where they gave an overview of AFBI and discussed AFBI's various science programs. The Chair describe the meeting as very positive and highlighted the importance which the Minister is placing on science.

The Chair referred to the recent Board Workshop held on 16 April 2024 to assess and reflect on the effectiveness of the Board and its Committee structure and described a few key outcomes from the workshop. The Chair suggested that the next step should involve a wider discussion with the Executive to ensure the Board fulfils its remit whilst recognising the pressures on Executive time.

The Chair also informed the Board members that he will be undertaking the annual appraisals shortly and will ask the Secretariat to schedule in one to one meetings.

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14. Any Other Business

There were no additional items of business.

15. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content the meeting had been effective.

16. Date of Next Meeting

The next AFBI Board Meeting will be held on Tuesday 21 May 2024.