



**Minutes of the
Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)
Board Meeting held via WebEx
on Thursday 26 August 2021 at 10.00hrs**

**Present via WebEx
Board Members**

Mr Colin Coffey, Chair
Mrs Roberta Brownlee, Vice Chair
Ms Kate Burns
Ms Theresa Cullen
Mrs Fiona Hanna
Dr Richard Horton
Ms Joan Houston
Mr Richard Solomon
Mrs Sharon Smyth

AFBI Board Apprentice

Ms Morag Abernethy
Mr Nigel Morris

AFBI Executive:

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer
Mrs Josephine Kelly, Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs Division
Dr Elizabeth Magowan, Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division
Mr Pieter-Jan Schön, Director of Environment and Marine Sciences Division

In Attendance (via WebEx)

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance
Dr Norman Fulton, Deputy Secretary, Food and Farming Group, DAERA (Item 9)
Mrs Lisa Donnelly, AFBI Secretariat
Mrs Stephanie Robinson, AFBI Secretariat

ACTION**1. Welcome and Introduction**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

2. Apologies

Dr Michelle Costello-Smith, Board Member
Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division

3. Conflict of Interests Declaration

None declared.

The Board noted Mrs Hanna has been appointed as a Member of the Board of Warrenpoint Harbour Authority.

4. Draft Minutes of Previous Board Meeting held on 24 June 2021

The draft minutes from the Board meeting held on 24 June 2021 were accepted as an accurate and fair representation of the meeting.

The minutes of the Extraordinary Board Meeting held on 29 July would be provided at the next Board meeting for approval.

4.1 Action Sheet of the Previous Board Meeting held on 24 June 2021

The Board noted the progress against actions as per the Action Sheet.

5. Brexit Update

Dr McDowell advised that discussions were on-going between DAERA and AFBI staff in relation to the known and potential changes in testing and other requirements following EU Exit and the implementation of the Northern Ireland Protocol. These discussions included consideration of the financial implications of the required changes.

BREAK (10.35 - 10.45 am)

6. Governance Issues

6.1 Risk Management

6.1.1 Reports of New or Emerging Risks

Mr Montgomery advised the Board there were no new or emerging risks to the organisation.

6.1.2 Quarterly Risk Management Update

Mr Montgomery advised that the Quarterly Risk Management Update had been provided at the last Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) meeting. He noted that this update paper would also be brought to the September Board meeting.

GM

6.2 Fraud

6.2.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

Mr Montgomery advised the Board that during Quarter 1 of 2021/22 (up to 30 June 2021) there were no new cases of suspected or actual fraud identified. However, since the quarter end two new cases have been reported.

Mr Montgomery further noted that work was continuing with regards to a case of potential fraud raised in Quarter 4 of 2020/21 relating to a live whistleblowing case.

Mr Montgomery will provide the Board with an update at the September Board meeting.

GM

6.3 Whistleblowing

6.3.1 Reports of New or Ongoing Cases

Mr Montgomery advised the Board that there were no new cases and provided an update on the current ongoing cases.

6.3.2 AFBI Whistleblowing and Raising Concern Policy and Guidance

Mr Montgomery presented the paper on the revised AFBI Whistleblowing Policy and associated Guidance for Management.

Following discussion took place around the Policy, Procedures and Guidance documents. It was agreed that Mr Montgomery would review the policy and guidance and provide an update at the next Board meeting.

GM

6.4 Complaints

6.4.1 Reports of New or Emerging Complaints

Mr Montgomery advised the Board that there had been no corporate complaints received by AFBI in Quarter 1 (April to June 2021)

6.5 Business Plan 2021-22 – Quarter 1 Corporate KPI Outturns as at 30 June 2021

Mr Montgomery presented the "*Business Plan 2021-22 - Quarter 1 Corporate KPI Outturns as at 30 June 2021*" which provided the provisional outturn against the 15 Corporate KPIs as at the end of Quarter 1, 30 June 2021.

Mr Montgomery advised that the returns provided by Management indicated good progress had been made in Quarter 1 with one KPI achieved and the remaining 14 KPIs on target to be achieved. He highlighted that the achievement of KPI 13 on staff Performance Appraisals was significant and reflected the focus and efforts made within AFBI to ensure that this important target would be achieved for 2021-22.

The Board discussed the recent letter received from Dr Norman Fulton, Deputy Secretary, Food and Farming Group, DAERA, in relation to the delivery of Evidence and Innovation (E&I) projects.

Mrs Kelly noted that a meeting had been scheduled to take place shortly with Dr Alistair Carson, Chief Scientific Adviser, DAERA and she would report back to the Board and EMT.

JK

6.6 Guidance on Completion of Assurance Statements

Mr Montgomery presented the "*Guidance on Completion of Assurance Statements*" which the Board noted. The Chair thanked Mr Montgomery for his very detailed report. Mr Montgomery outlined that the Accounting Officer's Quarterly Assurance Statement is presented quarterly to ARAC and would also be brought to the Board twice a year.

7. **Health & Safety**

7.1 Health & Safety Update

The Board noted the "*Health & Safety Update Report*" and the significant amount of work that had been undertaken across AFBI to ensure compliance with Northern Ireland Executive Covid-19 Regulations.

The Board queried if there was a timeline in place for the 'Safety Climate' survey. Mrs Kelly agreed that she would report back to the Board.

JK

The Board discussed the importance of reporting 'near misses' in identifying potential issues and asked for an update. Mrs Kelly agreed to provide an update to the Board regarding progress on this at their next meeting

JK

The Board referred to the levels of ongoing recruitment within AFBI and how AFBI provide new recruits with health and safety training during the current pandemic. It was agreed that Mrs Kelly would update the Board at their next meeting.

JK

Mrs Kelly would also report back to the Board regarding Covid-19 cases.

JK

8. Finance & Business

8.1 Finance Update Report

Mrs Kelly presented the "*Finance Update Report*".

Mrs Kelly provided the Board with an analysis of AFBI's 2021/22 October Monitoring Round Submission, a summary of AFBI's response to a DAERA Budget Reduction Scenario Planning Exercise, 2021/22 Annual Report & Accounts (AR&A) Audit, and the ongoing Royalty dispute.

It was noted by the Board that following the latest branch operational and budgetary reviews carried out in July and August, a revised forecast, in the absence of receipt of the October monitoring round budget requests, was projecting an in-year budgetary pressure of £1.8m. The Board were concerned by these projections and sought assurance of the actions being taken by EMT. Mrs Kelly advised that this projection was based on not receiving any of the monitoring requests, which was unlikely as DAERA Finance had indicated that some amounts would be received, as detailed in the Finance Update Report. She further added that if the monies were not received from the Monitoring Round, then there were mitigations identified that would be put in place to manage the budget pressures in year. She anticipated that AFBI would know the outcome of the October Monitoring Round by the next Board meeting and would update the Board in the September Report.

JK

The October Monitoring Round further included bids in relation to Brexit. These bids were identified under two headings, namely;

- NI Protocol Points of Entry – Bids under this category form part of funding directly from HM Treasury and must be, as a result of The Northern Ireland Protocol, specifically Accreditation and Points of Entry testing.
- EU Exit – Bids under this category relate to other EU Exit costs and are funded by DAERA.

Mrs Kelly highlighted that the bid regarding the Northern Ireland Protocol Points of Entry is based on the recent information provided from AFBI to DAERA for a business case. The values have been revised downwards in the current year to reflect four months resource requirement in the year.

2020/21 Annual Report and Accounts

Mrs Kelly advised that the draft 2020/21 Annual Report and Accounts were presented to the ARAC on 23 June 2021. Finance have provided the Northern Ireland Audit Office with a draft version of the Annual Report and Accounts to enable them to begin their review and select their samples for testing prior to the commencement of the audit.

DAERA Budget Reduction Scenario Planning Exercise

Mrs Kelly noted in June 2021 that DAERA had commissioned the Budget 2022-26 Information Gathering Exercise which covered the three year period from 2022-23 to 2024-25 for Resource with one further year, 2025-26, being required for Capital. This was the beginning of an iterative process and AFBI provided information on Resource Pressures and Capital Spending proposals.

AFBI await further engagement with DAERA to determine the next steps of the process.

Royalty Dispute Update

Mrs Kelly advised that the Business Case had been approved. The Chair commended staff on all their work in this regard.

9. Presentation from Dr Norman Fulton, Deputy Secretary, Food and Farming Group, DAERA

The Chair introduced and welcomed Dr Fulton to the Board meeting.

Dr Fulton provided the Board with a presentation highlighting the DAERA's Future Agricultural Policy Framework Portfolio and the key

desired outcomes which includes increased productivity, environmental sustainability, improved resilience, supply chain functionality, the main product work streams, next steps in the development process, and timelines for engagement.

Dr Fulton advised that DAERA intended to consult on policy proposals for these in the autumn 2021. He added that a Food Framework Consultation is also expected to be published shortly.

Lunch (12.30 – 1.00 pm)

10. Executive Report

The Board noted the “*Executive Report*” for August 2021. Discussions focused on a number of key issues.

Recruitment Activity

Dr McDowell noted that the number of permanent vacancies and the number of posts covered by agency staff continued to be of significant concern. A series of recruitment competitions were underway to fill a number of these posts within the current financial year.

Update from Research Support Office (RSO)

The Board commended the RSO on their work in exploring new funding opportunities and collaborations with external partners.

SCM Development Project

Dr McDowell noted that the work on this important project was progressing in line with the project plan.

Estates Strategy

Mrs Kelly advised that this formed part of AFBI’s Business Plan targets for 2021-22 and work on this was progressing. It is intended to present a draft Estates Strategy to the Board before the year end.

Events Planner

The Board requested that the title of an AFBI/DAERA Webinar should be considered and amended accordingly.

EM

11. Green Growth Update

Mr Schön provided an update to the Board on the “*Green Growth Capital Project*” highlighting that work was in progress and that one single overarching Business Case had been prepared for the Green Growth project in 2021-22 & 2022-23. A draft of the Business Case is currently with DAERA for review. A further update on progress will be presented at the next Board meeting.

12. Beef Facilities Update

Dr Magowan highlighted to the Board that, following the approval to proceed, the Project Board met in late June. Demolition work of the old facilities at Hillsborough is now moving at pace. A further update on progress will be presented at the next Board Meeting.

PJS

13. Board Sub-Committees

13.1 Minutes of Board Sub-Committees

EM

13.1.1 Report of the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 5 July 2021

The Chair of the Committee noted the minutes would be circulated in due course.

13.1.2 Report of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 23 June 2021

The Board noted the draft minutes from the previous meeting held on 23 June 2021.

14. Chair’s Remarks

The Chair advised that he had attended a number of positive meetings with Professor Stuart Elborn, Queen’s University Belfast (QUB), Mr Brian Doherty, DAERA, Mrs Tracey Teague, Northern Ireland Environment Agency (NIEA) and Mr Anthony Harbinson, the new Acting Permanent Secretary for DAERA.

He advised that DAERA had indicated that, due to the current position of public sector funding, there was a need to plan for possible budget reductions from April 2022. He stressed the need for EMT to consider urgently how AFBI would respond and asked for a review of services, programmes and costs to be undertaken.

The Chair noted that a Board / EMT meeting had taken place regarding the draft DAERA Operational R&D policy. A follow up meeting is to be scheduled.

The Chair confirmed the Board Away Day will be held at AFBI Newforge on 16 September 2021.

EMT

14.1 Independent Review into the Circumstances of Board Member Resignations in the Regulation Quality & Improvement Authority (RQIA)

The Board discussed the recently issued report for the Department of Health on the Independent Review into the Circumstances of Board Member Resignations in the RQIA. It was agreed that this would be examined as part of the Agenda for the Board Away Day to ensure any applicable lessons could be learnt.

15. Any Other Business

None to report.

16. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Board was content the meeting had been effective.

17. Date of Next Board Meeting

The next AFBI Board meeting is scheduled to take place on Thursday 30 September 2021.