

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)  
Board Meeting held in the Boardroom, AFBI Newforge and virtually  
on Tuesday 27 August 2024 at 10.00hrs**

**Board Members**

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

**AFBI Executive**

Dr Stanley McDowell, Chief Executive Officer  
Mr Terry McGonigal, Interim Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs Division  
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)  
Mrs Jenni Burrows, Digital, Data and Technology (DDaT) Project Lead  
Mrs Stephanie Robinson, AFBI Secretariat

**Visitors**

Ms Fiona McCandless, Deputy Secretary, Central Services and Contingency Planning Group, DAERA (item 10)  
Mr Ambrose Tohill, Strategic Planning & Corporate Services Group, DAERA (item 10)  
Mr Gerry Millar, Strategic Investment Board (SIB) (item 10)  
Ms Olivia Laughlin, Collins Rolston Architects (item 10)

**1. Welcome and Introduction**

**ACTION**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

## **2. Apologies**

Apologies were received on behalf of AFBI Board Deputy Chair, Mrs Roberta Brownlee.

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

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

## **4. Draft Minutes of AFBI Board Meeting held on 2 July 2024**

The draft minutes of the Board Meeting held on 2 July 2024 were accepted as accurate and a fair representation of the meeting.

### **4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 2 July 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 Oversight and Governance Meeting on 20 June 2024**

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Oversight and Governance Committee Meeting held on 20 June 2024.

The Chair referred to the discussion on the Staff Survey results. The Board noted that matters raised were being taken forward and acknowledged the amount of work being undertaken following the analysis of the Staff Survey outcomes.

### **5.2 Report of the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 26 June 2024**

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Science Strategy Committee (SSC) Meeting held on 26 June 2024.

The Chair advised that a letter to the DAERA Minister had been drafted to relay the AFBI Board's concerns over the knowledge transfer elements of the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme (SNHS). This had been reviewed by Committee Chairs and would be issued as soon as possible. Mr Schön advised that he had raised the issue at a recent

**Chair**

SNHS Project Board meeting and a Task and Finish Group had been set up to look at the Knowledge Transfer and training. Mr Schön agreed to circulate the Terms of Reference when finalised.

**PJS**

The Chair referred to the presentation to SSC by Dr Archie Murchie on the newly created Plant health and Integrated Pest Management Branch and felt it would be useful to have an overview of the new Branches at the next Board meeting.

**EM**

### **5.3** Report of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Meeting on 27 June 2024

The Board noted the draft minutes of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 27 June 2024.

#### **5.3.1** Audit and Risk Assurance Committee Annual Report 2023 - 24

The Chair thanked the ARAC Chair for the detailed AFBI Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Annual Report 2023-24, which was noted by the Board.

Mr Wright highlighted that the Annual Report formed part of the governance assurance statement to the Board and the Accounting Officer that both internal and external audit issues were being addressed and that recommendations were being followed up.

The Chair felt this was a very useful report as it highlighted the progress made by the organisation in a number of areas.

The Chair also referred to a recent letter received from the DAERA Permanent Secretary with regards to the Assigned Work Programme (AWP) and suggested it would be useful for the letter to be circulated to the Board.

**Exec**

## **6. Governance Issues**

### **6.1 Risk Management**

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

There were no new or emerging risks.

The Chair highlighted the risk from Avian Flu and the Executive provided assurance this risk is reflected in the current Corporate Risk Register and AFBI has the capability and capacity to respond. AFBI continues to liaise with DAERA in relation to emergency response requirements and containment laboratories at VSD.

### **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.

Mr Montgomery referred to the results of the recent Staff Survey which highlighted the need to continue to enhance staff awareness of the subject. Work is underway to deliver a communications plan to increase awareness of the Raising Concern Policy and supporting Guidance for Line Managers.

There were no new or ongoing raising concerns cases. One previous case of suspected fraud has been closed out and actions have been taken to prevent a reoccurrence. In relation to ongoing cases the Board noted that following a significant investigation a number of recommendations have been identified and actions are underway to prevent recurrence.

### **6.3 AFBI Business Plan 2024-25 – Q1 KPI Outturns as at 30 June 2024**

Mr Montgomery presented the paper on the provisional outturn of the Corporate KPIs 2024-25 as at the end of Quarter 1, 30 June 2024.

The Chair welcomed the revised format of the KPI reporting which provides a clear link from the KPIs to the outcomes set out within AFBI's corporate plan.

The Board noted that 14 of the 15 KPIs were currently on track for delivery and that one was provisionally indicated as Amber. This related to AFBI submitting an application for achieving Public Sector Research Establishment (PSRE) status.

### **6.3.1** Impacts Booklet

The Board welcomed the finalised version of the Impacts Booklet which showcased a range of case studies demonstrating the impact of AFBI science.

The Board congratulated the team on the work undertaken to produce the booklet.

### **6.4** CEO Assurance Statement 2024-25 Q1

The Board noted the CEO Assurance Statement 2024-25 – Quarter 1 and agreed that it aligned with the Board’s understanding of the key issues within AFBI.

The Board noted the assurances around cyber security and the Executive highlighted the ongoing work to provide greater assurance in this important area.

### **6.5** DAERA Review of AFBI

Mr Montgomery gave an overview of the current position of the DAERA Public Body Review of AFBI which commenced in August 2024. It is anticipated that meetings will be held over the next period with a range of stakeholders including a number of Board Members.

An opportunity to further discuss the review was scheduled directly after the Board meeting and all Board members were encouraged to attend.

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

Mr McGonigal updated the Board on Health and Safety matters. He noted that work was progressing on the business case for the decommissioning of the Radionuclide Laboratory and a bid had been

submitted in the October Monitoring round, to progress to Tender stage for the appointment of specialist contractors.

He also informed the Board that HSENI had undertaken Inspections of facilities at Stormont and Hillsborough and outlined the key issues highlighted. AFBI's Health and Safety Team are liaising with staff at both locations and responses to HSENI are being prepared.

Finally, Mr McGonigal referred to two H&S incidents that occurred since the last Board report and one incident had resulted in minor injuries to a member of staff.

## **8. Finance & Business**

### **8.1 Finance Update Report**

Mr McGonigal presented the Finance paper and provided an update on the 2024-25 budget.

Mr McGonigal reported that the October Monitoring Round had been commissioned on 5 July 2024 and the return submitted on 9 August 2024. AFBI has realigned the opening budgets in the October Monitoring Round to bring them in line with AFBI's expenditure plans. He also noted that in the monitoring round there were additional capital bids of approximately £1.6m in respect of recurrent capital and systems capital.

### **8.2 Out of Contract Expenditure**

Mr McGonigal informed the Board of a situation that resulted in 'out of contract' expenditure and that AFBI Finance are working on the required processes to address the issue. During the discussions, the Board noted the action being taken and the additional controls to be introduced to reduce the possibility of a reoccurrence.

## **9. CEO Update**

The CEO highlighted a number of updates including the following:

- The Animal Health Sciences building Final Business Case has been approved by the Department of Finance with the next step

being to seek approval from the DAERA Permanent Secretary for issue of the tender for the construction phase.

- Three new science Heads of Branch have been appointed.
- Interviews have been held for the post of Director of Finance and Corporate Affairs and the process has moved to clearance and offer stage.
- Following the ISO17025 audit visits by the Irish National Accreditation Board (INAB) in February - April 2024, all audit findings have now been cleared and AFBI's application for accreditation will now go for decision to the next INAB Board meeting in September 2024. Gaining this additional ISO17025 accreditation by an EU accreditation body is a requirement of the Official Controls Regulation and terms of EU Exit.
- AFBI VSD have been informed by a commercial customer of Bovine Viral Diarrhoea (BVD) testing that they are changing supplier.
- 60% of farm businesses in zone 3 has registered for the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme.
- Work on the build of a new AFBI Research Vessel is progressing well and is currently two months ahead of schedule.

## **10. AFBI Strategic Review of AFBI Land and Property Holdings**

The Chair welcomed Ms Fiona McCandless, Mr Gerry Millar, Mr Ambrose Tohill and Ms Olivia Laughlin to the meeting.

Ms McCandless outlined the work undertaken on the Strategic Review of the AFBI Land and Property Holdings. She stated that this had been an important piece of work as part of the ongoing wider review of the DAERA Estate and looked forward to the subsequent discussion at today's meeting.

Ms Laughlin provided an update on the work undertaken in the development of the AFBI Estate Masterplanning Exercise by Collins Rolston Architects and their team of masterplanning consultants the Project Board. She outlined the Executive Summary, the constraints, opportunities and common benefits identified and as well as the various options in relation to the Masterplans. An outline of the cost appraisal timescales for delivery for the preferred options was also provided.

There was a discussion on a number of logistical matters including impacts on traffic flow and site access. It was confirmed that reports on site environment, planning and utilities, which cover a number of assessments around such matters, had been undertaken as part of the '*Technical Due Diligence*' phase of the Masterplanning exercise and report.

The Chair thanked Ms Laughlin for her very useful and informative presentation. He asked what the next steps would entail.

Ms McCandless advised that whilst there was no certainty at this stage consideration has been given to the likely resources needed to take forward the various work strands arising from the review and a proposal prepared to move to the next stage. However, she advised that delivery of the programme and resourcing would be subject to affordability and take cognisance of the many competing projects and priorities that the Department and AFBI have and will have for capital funding during that period. She concluded that the process had been a really useful exercise in giving clarity on the future direction of travel for the DAERA owned AFBI Estate.

*Mr Campbell left the meeting.*

## **11. AFBI Science Strategy Update**

The Chair welcomed Dr McCleery to the meeting.

Dr McCleery gave an overview of the refined priorities of the AFBI Science Strategy 2030 which were aligned with the AFBI Corporate Plan 2023-2027. He outlined a number of actions which had been identified and would be led primarily by the three Science Directors and which were cross-cutting across the organisation. A strategy map has been created to ensure a focus on strategic rather than operational goals.

Dr McCleery advised that he would be meeting with DAERA colleagues to share and seek comment on the AFBI Science Strategy.

## **12. Review of Board Effectiveness**

Mr Montgomery presented a paper and gave an overview of the results of the AFBI Board's Review of Board Effectiveness 2023-24.



The Chair noted that Board members had indicated that AFBI was meeting or exceeding expectations across all six key principles of good governance and that the trends in terms of scoring, showed a continued improvement across the key criteria. It was noted that a session between the Board and the Executive on the remit of the Committees and reducing any duplication would be arranged following agreement with the Chair.

**13. Chair's Remarks**

The Chair informed the Board of his recent meeting with a DAERA Deputy Secretary.

The Chair also informed the Board that his term of office had been extended to the end of October 2024 pending completion of the process to appoint his successor.

**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 and that all key areas of business had been covered.

**16. Date of Next Meeting**

The next AFBI Board Meeting will be held on Tuesday 1 October 2024.