

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)  
Board Meeting held in the Boardroom, AFBI Newforge  
on Thursday 6 February 2025 at 10.00hrs**

**Board Members**

Prof Grace Mulcahy, Chair  
Mr Martyn Blair  
Mrs Daphne Johnston  
Mr Tim McClelland  
Mr Bill Montgomery

Mr Alan Moore  
Ms Therese Rafferty  
Mr Tom Tynan  
Mr Tom Wright

**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 Pieter-Jan Schön, Director of Environment and Marine Sciences Division

**In Attendance**

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance  
Mrs Jenni Burrows, Digital, Data & Technology (DDaT) Project Lead (Item 9)  
Dr Ewan Hunter, Head of Fisheries and Aquatic Ecosystems Branch (Item 10)  
Mrs Stephanie Robinson, AFBI Secretariat

**1. Welcome and Introduction**

**ACTION**

The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting.

**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 12 December 2024**

The draft minutes of the Board Meeting held on 12 December 2024 were accepted as accurate and a fair representation of the meeting.

##### **4.1 Action Sheet from AFBI Board Meeting held on 12 December 2024**

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

The Chair highlighted that the Chief Scientific Adviser and the Deputy Secretary, Climate Change, Science and Innovation Group, had been invited to the meeting today, as requested at the previous Board meeting. However, due to other commitments, both were unable to attend, but plan to attend the March 2025 Board meeting.

It was agreed a pre-meeting should be held in advance and Chair and CEO to consider.

**CEO**

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

##### **5.1 Report of the Audit and Risk Assurance Committee (ARAC) Meeting held on 4 February 2025**

While a number of key topics would arise as part of today's agenda, Mr Wright provided a brief summary of the key discussions at the recent ARAC meeting held on 4 February 2025.

He highlighted the discussion on the Internal Audit schedule and the impact of the backlog of the schedule on staff. Mr Montgomery outlined that the schedule had been agreed with staff and as it was a multi-year schedule, a change in review dates had been requested by some business areas and Internal Audit have facilitated AFBI's request. Assurance has been obtained from our internal audit provider, that the 2024/25 work programme will be completed on time to be reflected in the Annual Report and Accounts.

Mr Wright was pleased to note that the Review of Risk Management had received a satisfactory assurance level. He did highlight however one of the recommendations relating to the completion of divisional Assurance statements.

The Terms of Reference for the (i) Review of Research and Development (including Evidence and Innovation) and (ii) Review of non-DAERA Income were both approved by ARAC.

Mr Wright reported that Internal Audit had provided an update on the new Global International Audit Standards. Internal Audit had indicated that training could be provided to ARAC and Board. It was agreed this would be beneficial to consider and Mr Montgomery would follow up.

**GM**

The Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) also provided an update on the initial audit work for the 2024/25 Annual Report and Accounts. Mr Wright highlighted that Mr O'Neill had indicated that a similar project management approach would be taken to that used for the 2023/24 Annual Report and Accounts.

An update was given by Mr Montgomery on the outstanding audit recommendations and Mr Wright highlighted the reduction of active recommendations.

The Board enquired in relation to the DAERA commissioned Review of AFBI. It was noted that the Report was currently being checked for factual accuracy and that it would then be for the Department to consider next steps.

## **5.2** Committee Membership

Following the departure of a number of Board members, there had previously been discussion that membership of the Committees would be best served by allocating additional members to the Board Committees and a proposed re-structure had been circulated. The Board agreed with this proposal. Secretariat will update meeting invitations accordingly.

**Sec**

## **5.3** Schedule of Meeting Dates

The Board noted the proposed schedule of meeting dates for 2025-2026.

## **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.

#### **6.1.2 *Quarterly Risk Management Update including review of the Corporate Risk Register***

Mr Montgomery presented the Risk Management Update paper and summarised the key changes incorporated into the latest AFBI Corporate Risk Register (CRR).

It was noted that the risk score for Corporate Risk 4, Finance, and the Corporate Risk 8, Systems & Digital risk, had reduced, reducing AFBI's risk profile to one red risk. The Board noted the proposed changes and indicated that it was content.

### **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 no new raising concerns cases had been brought to the Executive's attention since the previous Board meeting in December 2024. Mr Montgomery provided an update in relation to the live cases.

It was noted that there were no new cases of suspected or potential fraud and Members noted the position on live cases.

### **6.3 AFBI Business Plan 2024-25 – KPI Outturns at 31 December 2024**

Mr Montgomery presented the paper on the AFBI Corporate KPIs as at 31 December 2024. Based on the commentary and returns provided by reporting officers, twelve are on track to be achieved (Green), progress of one KPI is less than planned (Amber) and two are broadly on track with easily redeemable features (Amber/Green).

#### **6.4** CEO Assurance Statement 2024-25 – Q3

The Board noted the CEO Assurance Statement for the third quarter of 2024-25 and were content that the Assurance Statement was consistent with the Board’s understanding of the various issues listed.

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

Ms McAuley presented the Health & Safety Update.

Ms McAuley highlighted that reported incidents has increased but has not been accompanied by an increase in RIDDOR reportable incidents which have reduced. This is consistent with improved governance and awareness of compliance. The Health and Safety team have been working with business areas on building understanding and training.

### **8. Finance & Business**

#### **8.1** Finance Update Report

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

##### 2024-25 Budget Update

Ms McAuley outlined that the predicted end-of-year position was that AFBI’s spend would be within budget tolerances. This is however dependent on income and expenditure remaining on track and delivery of the remaining capital expenditure items by end of the financial year.

##### Capital Update

The Chair enquired about progress of the Green Growth business cases.

It was noted that one business case had been approved by the Department and procurement of the items was underway. Prof Magowan updated the Board that work was ongoing on a further three business cases. She advised that a new Business Manager with significant experience on developing business cases had commenced

in post in early December 2024 and that they would be supporting completion.

## 9. DDaT Update

The Board welcomed Mrs Burrows to the meeting.

Mrs Burrows provided an update on the progress of the AFBI Digital, Data & Technology (DDaT) programme.

Mrs Burrows drew attention to the drafting of a strategic roadmap for the next 5 years which would align with AFBI's Corporate Plan, enable delivery of the Science Strategy and would outline the vision and direction for DDaT over the next few years, accelerating transformation in modernising systems and how data would be managed.

Mrs Burrows gave an overview of the objectives for DDaT, including shared platforms, cyber resilience, unlocking and maximising the value of data, and ensuring that AFBI has capability to optimise new and emerging technologies.

The Board enquired about cyber security. Mrs Burrows advised that the use of shared platforms with incorporated security protocols will help to address risks of current legacy systems.

Mrs Burrows provided a number of updates, including:

- Training has been ongoing for the 100+ staff in the use of the R statistical package.
- There would be a number of key system changes, particularly in relation to aging legacy databases that would need to go through cyber security enhancements.
- The upgrade of Q-Pulse is scheduled for summer 2025
- Vulnerability testing has been ongoing with regards to cyber security and issues are being addressed by the team.
- The Technology Change Advisory Board (TCAB) has been implemented and is progressing well.

Mrs Burrows referred to the AFBI Data Strategy and Action Plan and outlined that work has been ongoing. Mrs Burrows agreed to circulate the Data Maturity Assessment results to the Board.

**JB/Sec**

The Board thanked Mrs Burrows for her informative update.

#### **10. Fisheries and Aquatic Ecosystems Branch Marine Science Remit - Why AFBI need a new Research Vessel**

The Board welcomed Dr Hunter to the meeting.

Dr Hunter provided an overview of the marine science remit of the Fisheries and Aquatic Ecosystems Branch (FAEB). He highlighted the importance of the new research vessel to the work undertaken by AFBI, including Marine Fisheries, Oceanography and Limnology, Marine Ecology and Freshwater Fisheries.

Dr Hunter highlighted there has been an increase in the mapping programme from 240 to 270 days per annum due to demand for seabed mapping. He also noted that there would be more opportunities for multi-disciplinary working with the new research vessel.

The Board thanked Dr Hunter for his informative presentation which he would share with the Board.

**Sec**

#### **11. CEO and Science Directors Update**

The CEO and Directors highlighted a number of updates including the following:

- The tender has been issued for the Animal Health Sciences Building and a number of queries have been dealt with by the Project Board.
- The Irish National Accreditation Board (INAB) have agreed to pair up with the UK Accreditation Service (UKAS) for the next assessment which will be led by UKAS.
- There were no findings from the results of the recent ISO 9001 visit.
- The clean-up operation has commenced at the Loughgall site following the recent Storm Éowyn. The Chair congratulated the team on the managing the situation and all the difficulties encountered.

- Feedback has been received from DAERA on the recent Evidence and Innovation (E&I) proposals.
- Planning for the Ruminant Emissions Research Facility (RERF) is progressing well.
- Launch of UK Dell / Dairy Carbon Network (DCN) project took place on 5 February 2025.

Mr Schön provided an update on the progress of the work on the research vessel undertaken at the Spanish shipyard of the research vessel.

## **12. Chair's Remarks**

The Chair advised that while the official report of the DAERA commissioned Review of AFBI has not been received, she and the CEO have received a draft copy for a review of factual accuracy.

## **13. Any Other Business**

### **13.1 Science Impacts**

The Board referred to the AFBI Science Impacts publication and asked if there could be a wider communication issued to AFBI's stakeholders highlighting the work included within the Impact publication. Ms McAuley noted that work was underway with regard to an updated Communications strategy.

**NMcA**

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

The Board was content that the meeting had been effective.

## **15. Date of Next Meeting**

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