

**Minutes of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)
Board Meeting held in the Boardroom, AFBI Newforge and virtually
on Thursday 7 November 2024 at 10.00hrs**

Board Members

Prof Grace Mulcahy, 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
Dr Alastair Douglas, Director of Veterinary Sciences Division (VSD)
Mr Ivor Johnston, Interim Director of Finance & Corporate Affairs Division (FCAD)
Dr Paul Caskie, Head of Economics Research Branch (ERB), Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division (SAFSD)

In Attendance

Mr Glenn Montgomery, Head of Governance and Performance
Dr Ken Lemon, Virology Branch (Item 9)
Mr James Adams, AFBI Secretariat

1. Welcome and Introduction

ACTION

Prof Mulcahy warmly welcomed everyone to her first meeting as Chair of the AFBI Board. The Chair noted that she felt very privileged to be offered the role and looked forward to working with the Board and Executive to deliver the priorities of AFBI which will benefit the local and wider economy.

The Chair provided a brief summary of her background including her previous role as Dean of Veterinary Medicine at University College Dublin (UCD) which involved working with a number of stakeholders across various disciplines.

Following some introductions, attendees congratulated Prof Mulcahy on her appointment and wished her well in the role.

2. Apologies

Apologies were received on behalf of Prof Elizabeth Magowan, Director of SAFSD and Mr Pieter-Jan Schön, Director of Environment and Marine Sciences Division. It was noted that Dr Caskie was representing SAFSD.

3. Conflicts of Interest Declaration

There were no conflicts of interest declared.

4. Draft Minutes of AFBI Board Meeting held on 1 October 2024

The draft minutes of the Board Meeting held on 1 October 2024 were accepted as accurate and a fair representation of the meeting.

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, apart from the following:

4.1.1 Soil Nutrient Health Scheme

The DAERA Minister has responded to the Board's letter on the Soil Nutrient Health Scheme (SNHS) and this was circulated to Board members prior to the meeting. The Board welcomed the approach outlined in the correspondence with regard to the intentions to increase knowledge transfer and Mr McClelland informed the Board that he was aware that the College of Agriculture Food & Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) has arranged a number of large scale training events which are due to be held later this month.

4.1.2 DAERA/AFBI Joint Board Meeting

It was noted that the DAERA/AFBI Joint Board Meeting is scheduled to be held on 19 March 2025 at Greenmount College.

5. Board Sub-Committees

5.1 Report of the Oversight and Governance Meeting on 26 September 2024

The Committee noted the draft minutes from the Oversight and Governance Meeting held on 26 September 2024.

On the subject of the Animal Health Science Building Project, Dr Douglas advised that DAERA are to provide details to AFBI of embedded building resilience included in the design.

5.2 Report of the Finance & Business Strategy Committee Meeting held on 3 October 2024

The Committee noted the draft minutes from the Finance & Business Strategy Committee Meeting held on 3 October 2024.

Mr Tynan recapped on some of the key topics discussed including the report from AFBI's Research Support Office (RSO) on new bids and contracts. When discussing co-centre grants, Dr Douglas raised a potential conflict of interest as his partner is a manager of a co-centre grant in DAERA. The Board noted this but was content to proceed as there was no specific discussions on individual co-centre grants.

On the application for Public Sector Research Establishments (PSRE) status, it was noted that there is a dedicated resource from AFBI's Financial Costing Team in place and a target for completion by the end of March 2025.

There was also a brief discussion around communications and the CEO advised that he had provided some feedback on the draft Review of AFBI's Communications and future strategy. It was agreed that the session on AFBI Communications would be facilitated at Board at the appropriate time.

5.3 Report of the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 16 October 2024

Mr McClelland reported on the Science Strategy Committee Meeting held on 16 October 2024. He highlighted the excellent work of AFBI in

submitting research proposals to a number of calls with 15 successful during the period and several more in preparation.

A presentation was also provided on the background and progress to date on the AFBI/CAFRE beef facilities project. The refinement of costs and specifications is the next stage of the process and then the business case will be presented to DAERA for consideration. The Committee had expressed some concern around the potential increase of costs given the passage of time since the Outline Business Case (OBC) was approved in 2019. The CEO advised that the decision on how the project is taken forward will ultimately rest with DAERA but that the intention is for the matter to come before the Board at an appropriate time for their view.

5.4 Report of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 23 October 2024

Mrs Johnston gave a detailed report on the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee Meeting held on 23 October 2024. She covered the key elements of the People & Culture Report and the Recruitment and Retention project. The Committee also received an update from the Head of Health, Safety and Compliance Branch on ongoing activities to further enhance the Health & Safety culture.

It was also noted that the results of the recent Staff Engagement Survey had also been discussed in detail at the meeting and the Committee recommended that the Head of People and Culture Branch be invited to the Board to provide an overview of the results. The Board was content and the Chair asked that she be invited to the December Board meeting.

Exec

5.5 Report of the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 29 October 2024

In providing a detailed report on the Audit & Risk Assurance Committee Meeting held on 29 October 2024, Mr Wright covered a number of governance matters including the Internal Audit validation exercise of AFBI's Corporate KPIs 2023-24, positive progress on outstanding audit recommendations as well as the finance systems action plan.

The Northern Ireland Audit Office (NIAO) also presented the final Report to those Charged with Governance (RTTCWG) 2023-24 and Mr Wright again complemented all involved in achieving the faster closing deadline of the AFBI Annual Report and Accounts at the first time of asking. This had been possible by the robust project management approach adopted by AFBI and the positive engagement with the NIAO.

6. Governance Issues

6.1 Risk Management

6.1.1 *Reports of New or Emerging Risks*

There were no new or emerging risks to report.

6.1.2 Risk Management Update

Mr Montgomery presented the Risk Management Update paper and summarised the key changes incorporated into the latest AFBI Corporate Risk Register (CRR). The Board noted the proposed changes and indicated that it was content.

In relation to Corporate Risk 2 around a '*Failure to proactively identify and respond to the increasing pace of scientific development...*', a discussion ensued on the draft DAERA Science Commissioning Policy. It was agreed that it was important that the matter be discussed in detail at the next Board meeting to afford the Executive the opportunity to expand on the key points and the Board to understand these in depth. A copy of the draft policy including an Executive summary will be provided to the Board members in advance and following this, DAERA representatives will be invited to a future Board meeting.

Exec

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 it was noted by the Board.

There was one new raising concern case which is being investigated in line with the AFBI Raising Concern Policy and a potential case has now been closed out. There were no new cases of suspected fraud to report.

6.3 AFBI Business Plan 2024-25 – Key Performance Indicators (KPI) Outturns at 30 September 2024

Mr Montgomery presented the paper on the AFBI Corporate KPIs as at 30 September 2024. Based on the commentary and returns provided by reporting officers, eleven are on track to be achieved (Green), progress of one KPI is less than planned (Amber) and three are broadly on track with easily redeemable features (Amber/Green).

The Board noted the report and that the sequencing of future KPI validation exercises, undertaken by AFBI Internal Audit at year-end, will be revised to ensure close alignment with the faster closing timetable for the AFBI Annual Report & Accounts.

6.4 CEO Assurance Statement 2024-25 (Q2)

The Board noted the CEO Assurance Statement for the second quarter of 2024-25 and that the updates on topics reported to DAERA is consistent with the Board's understanding.

The CEO also informed the Board that the quarterly Accountability meeting with DAERA had been held earlier that week where the matters within the statement were discussed.

Mr Moore left the meeting

7. Health & Safety Update

Mr Johnston presented the AFBI Health Safety and Compliance Report and highlighted a few key points including Health & Safety (H&S) monitoring, accident statistics and the development of the Health & Safety Audit schedule that will run over a three-year period and be reported on to the Executive.

The Board noted the report.

8. Finance & Business

8.1 Finance Update Report

Mr Johnston presented the Finance Update paper and the following was noted:

2024-25 Monitoring Rounds

The outcome of the October Monitoring Round shows that AFBI overall DEL budget was increased by £662k and the realignment exercise included in the submission, to bring AFBI's operating costs in line with expectations, was also approved.

AFBI submitted a return to the DAERA commissioned January Monitoring Round on 23 October 2024 and the Board noted the anticipated position should bids of the DAERA Lease and Depreciation be met.

The Board noted that a further small in-year reduction in income was anticipated and allowed for within the current finance projections but that overall AFBI continues to project a balanced budget position at end-of-year. In response to a query on the Single Farm Payment, it was noted that the Departmental view was that this should no longer be claimed and is shown as a reduction in income for AFBI.

Capital Update

AFBI was not allocated any Recurrent Capital in the opening budget or Monitoring Rounds. The CEO noted that there were a number of capital items, typically replacement items, which are required to allow continued delivery of work programmes. Underspends in other capital lines have been realigned to Recurrent Capital in the January Monitoring Round and work is continuing on with the procurement of approved items and Directors are reviewing reserve lists to ensure full budget utilisation.

Procurement and Contract Management

The Board noted the update on procurement and contract management and was assured by the measures taken to ensure the process is as robust as possible. Mr Johnston advised that a contract

management module is being put in place and it is hoped this will be concluded in early 2025.

9. Presentation – ‘No Passport Required : Transboundary disease threats to NI and AFBI response to these.’

The Board welcomed Dr Lemon to the meeting to give a presentation on transboundary disease threats to NI and AFBI’s work to combat these.

Dr Lemon highlighted that epizootic diseases are typically highly contagious and easily transmissible. There is the capacity for rapid spread of such diseases with no respect for geographical borders, which causes serious impacts on the economy, trade, animal welfare, food security and public health.

Dr Lemon stated that the work of the Branch is encapsulated under AFBI’s Scientific theme of *‘Protecting animal, plant and human health’* and outlined the structure, facilities, testing regimes, and surveillance activities undertaken by the Virology Branch in response to epizootic diseases. He provided more detail in relation to causes and responses to recent Bluetongue Virus (BTV) outbreaks and his own specific area of expertise, Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI).

Dr Lemon also referred to the work of VSD and Virology Branch during the recent Coronavirus pandemic and how the rapid arrangement of a diagnostic facility showed how processes used for epizootic animal disease could be repurposed for threats in the human field. He concluded the presentation by pointing out some horizon scanning activities, disease concepts, new technologies and new approaches to surveillance.

Following a short Q&A, the Board thanked Dr Lemon for his informative presentation. It was noted during the Q&A that replacement high-containment accommodation (SAP03 / SAP04) was not part of the Animal Health Sciences Building project but was referred to in the recent Review of the AFBI-occupied estate. The Chair also added her complements to Dr Lemon and the team on their rapid testing capabilities and valuable contribution to research in this area.

Mr Murphy left the meeting
Mr Campbell left the meeting

10. CEO and Science Directors Update

The CEO provided a few key updates including the following:

- The DAERA Minister is scheduled to visit AFBI Stormont on 20 November 2024. The Chair will join the event and a briefing pack is being compiled in advance.
- The AFBI Impact Booklet is almost complete and is expected to be launched shortly.
- The AFBI Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) Strategy launch event is to be held on 14 November 2024.

Dr Douglas summarised some key matters from his division including recruitment of a senior post within Chemical Surveillance, release of a tender for the Animal Health Science Building (AHSB) build team and the progress on providing a unified Laboratory Information Management System (LIMS) at VSD and across AFBI.

Dr Caskie informed the Board that the Ruminant Emissions Research Facility (RERF) at Hillsborough has been granted planning permission, that preparatory demolition on site has begun and that the tender for the new build is expected to be released in early 2025. He also highlighted a forthcoming symposium that is linked to an Economic Research Branch project undertaken with farmers in the uplands. An invited audience of policy makers, scientists, environmental NGOs and farmer representatives will engage with a programme of presentation on the theme of peatland practice and prospects. It's an opportunity to showcase policy relevant research with a range of stakeholders.

Mrs Johnston left the meeting

The Chair thanked the Executive for the updates and on the subject of the DEI event, enquired if the multi-site footprint of AFBI adds to difficulty in maximising attendance. In response the CEO agreed that it can add to the difficulty but that previous events such as '*Women in Science*' was well attended. Where possible events are also held across the main sites such as the launch of the AFBI Values at VSD.

11. Chair's Remarks

The Chair thanked everyone for their help since the commencement of her term and felt that today's discussions had aided her in gaining an understanding on the current key issues such as the DAERA commissioned Review of AFBI, the draft DAERA Science Commissioning Policy and organisational development in terms of people and systems. On the matter of a Board and Executive workshop, the Chair expressed the view that it would be good to schedule this following the outworkings of the DAERA Review of AFBI.

The Chair also informed attendees that she will be commencing her introductory meetings with DAERA to gain their perspective and this will commence this afternoon where a meeting has been scheduled with the DAERA Senior Sponsor.

Finally, the Chair highlighted that the process to appoint a Deputy Chair to the Board is to begin shortly. This will be an open competition, advertised externally through The Commissioner for Public Appointments Northern Ireland (CPANI) and the Chair encouraged existing Board members to consider applying for the post.

12. Any Other Business

There were no additional items of business.

13. Review of Board Meeting Effectiveness

The Chair asked if attendees felt that they had the opportunity to contribute and that all points raised had been adequately discussed. The Board was content that the meeting had been effective.

14. Date of Next Meeting

The next AFBI Board Meeting will be held on Thursday 12 December 2024.