

**Oral Statement to the Northern Ireland Assembly**

**The Agri Food Bio Sciences Institute (AFBI) and associated  
governance matters**

**Tuesday 14th April 2026**

**Embargoed until delivered in the Chamber**

**Andrew Muir MLA**

**Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs**

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I wish to update Members on AFBI, the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute.

As members will be aware, AFBI plays a key role in protecting animal health and public health, safeguarding our agri-food economy, and providing diagnostic, scientific and emergency response capability when we face disease or other incidents.

That role is vital, and it must be delivered to the highest standards.

### **The Context**

Members will have often heard me speak about the challenges facing our environment and agriculture, including those associated with climate change, and the need for us to develop and implement effective policies in response.

These policies must be grounded in sound evidence and AFBI has a crucial role in providing the highest quality scientific and research advice and evidence to inform them.

Mr Speaker, we operate at a time when it is – worryingly – becoming increasingly common to attack science and evidence, particularly where it presents unwelcome or inconvenient truths. In this context, it is even more important that we all can have confidence in the work of AFBI.

That confidence is equally essential for the delivery of statutory scientific services, including laboratory testing and surveillance for animal

pathogens, and the wider scientific support that protects public health and maintains market confidence.

In this regard I am reassured by the fact that AFBI research underpinning policy development in my Department is subject to extensive use of rigorous external peer review mechanisms and operates in accordance with the requirements of ISO 9001, a Quality Management System.

AFBI's capability to respond to emergencies, quickly, safely and effectively, is a critical part of our overall resilience.

Farmers, the food industry, our partners and the wider public should be able to place the highest confidence in AFBI's work and the controls that sit around it.

I want to place on record my appreciation for the professionalism of AFBI staff and the importance of the services they provide.

Separately, I am equally clear that biosafety, good laboratory working practices, sound governance and robust assurance go hand in hand and are non-negotiable.

However, recent issues have emerged that mean that I need stronger and clearer assurance that standards are being applied consistently across AFBI. I want to set out for Members what those issues are and explain what I and my Department, supported by the AFBI board, are doing to address them.

## **Inspection findings: biosafety and health & safety**

I want to start by updating Members on a recent inspection report received from HSE GB, the Health and Safety Executive in Great Britain, as part of the licensing processes relating to laboratory activity and working with specified animal pathogens within AFBI.

The report, which was shared with AFBI, identifies areas where biosafety, laboratory working practices, and associated assurance arrangements need to be strengthened.

I want to reassure the public that AFBI continues to deliver vital diagnostic and surveillance services, and that there is robust regulatory oversight in place. This includes accreditation to the internationally recognised standard ISO 17025 in respect of statutory animal health and food safety testing.

There is no evidence of any breach or existential risk to public or animal health and immediate mitigations are in place to ensure essential diagnostic and surveillance services continue safely. However, the report does make very clear that some significant improvements are needed. These improvements are being implemented as part of an action plan agreed between AFBI and DAERA officials in response to the HSE GB report.

AFBI's laboratory work supports animal health, public health and our wider emergency disease response capability and where laboratories handle regulated pathogens, strong controls and clear assurance are essential.

My priority is to ensure that standards are consistently high and that the necessary assurances are clear, evidenced and sustained.

The purpose of the actions now underway is to strengthen those arrangements and provide confidence that requirements are being met consistently.

### **Allegations at the AFBI farm at Hillsborough**

Members will also be aware of some allegations made about practices at the AFBI farm at Hillsborough, including in relation to animal welfare and environmental practices. Some were historic in nature; others more recent.

I want to assure the Chamber that every one of those allegations was followed up by my Department, and indeed by the AFBI board, including most recently an incident of low severity pollution of a watercourse.

The work of the AFBI farm is of significant research importance but the farm operations also need to be conducted in a way that does not merely meet required animal welfare and environmental standards; rather my expectation is that AFBI should be leading by example in how it manages its farm operations.

## **Formal Review of AFBI**

As is routinely required for all non-departmental public bodies, AFBI has been subject to a review commissioned by my Department and reported to us in February of last year.

While the review found that AFBI's strategic direction is aligned with the priorities of the Executive and my Department and that AFBI is considered to be discharging its primary functions in an effective and efficient manner, it also makes several important recommendations.

These include the need to strengthen partnership working between AFBI and my Department; the need for there to be a stronger focus on strategic priorities; and, importantly, the need for AFBI to improve how it demonstrates impact; and drives effectiveness.

I have taken time to consider my Department's response to the review, including most recently to take account of the wider context outlined in this statement, and we will shortly publish both the review report and my departmental response.

I agree that departments and their ALBs should work together effectively in partnership, with clear accountability, strong governance and a shared focus on outcomes.

The AFBI review provides an opportunity to reset those arrangements but the issues now arising require action that is both urgent and sustained, alongside the recommendations of the AFBI review.

## **The AFBI response**

I am pleased to be able to report that the AFBI board has responded positively and proactively both to the review and to the other issues that have arisen since the AFBI review was finalised.

Following the recent HSE inspection findings, I have been assured by the AFBI chair that the AFBI chief executive and his team have begun immediate work to address the issues identified.

AFBI has developed an action plan in response to the HSE GB inspection with named ownership and timescales and my officials, supported by HSE colleagues, are engaging directly with AFBI's senior leadership to support rapid delivery and to secure the assurances that are required.

I am reassured that the AFBI board has also set up a dedicated board sub-group which has reviewed the operation of the farm at Hillsborough and has made recommendations for further improvement.

Implementation of the resulting action plan for farm operations will be monitored by the board.

I continue to engage with the chair of the AFBI board and I have set it **three immediate challenges** that must be addressed.

**First**, I have directed that the AFBI board's top priority in the months ahead must be to address the findings of the HSE report and demonstrate, through evidence, that testing is consistently carried out

safely, effectively and in full compliance with required standards, and that governance throughout the organisation is robust.

**Second**, in partnership with my Department, the board needs to articulate a clearer strategic direction for the organisation, ensuring that effort and investment are aligned to the highest priorities and deliver the strongest impact for our community, our environment and our economy.

**Third**, in light of concerns previously raised about animal welfare and environmental practice at the AFBI farm, I have asked the board to provide rigorous oversight and clear assurance that farm operations meet the highest standards and that any learning is embedded.

I recognise that the AFBI board has shown that it can respond decisively to serious issues, including the data breach incident that took place last year and in relation to issues raised at the Hillsborough farm.

I now need that same level of grip, pace and transparency applied to biosafety, working practices, and assurance in laboratory operations. The board is accountable to me to ensure that the necessary actions are implemented without delay, and has provided assurances that appropriate actions are being actively monitored.

### **Increased Oversight & Accountability**

As an executive non-departmental public body of DAERA, AFBI is responsible for putting these matters right in full and at pace. I have therefore asked the Board to develop an overall **Organisational Action Plan**.

At the same time, DAERA has a duty to ensure that governance, sponsorship and assurance arrangements are effective.

For the weeks and months ahead, urgent, sustained and verifiable action is required. Support will be provided, but it must be matched by strong oversight and clear accountability for delivery.

In response, and as part of a wider reset of sponsorship and governance arrangements through the AFBI review, I am therefore putting in place increased departmental oversight of AFBI with immediate effect.

DAERA officials will work with AFBI to support the development and monitoring of the overall Organisational Action Plan I have mentioned.

In parallel, my officials will apply stronger stewardship and governance in order to hold AFBI to account for delivery against agreed actions, milestones and evidence requirements.

I have asked to receive updates on at least a quarterly basis.

This increased oversight and scrutiny of AFBI is with immediate effect and will remain in place until I am reassured, on the basis of evidence, that AFBI's processes are safe, effective and fully compliant.

I expect my officials in DAERA and colleagues at AFBI to work in genuine partnership to bring about the changes that are required to address this issue and at the speed required.

## **What will happen next**

I have assigned responsibility for overseeing the necessary changes to my Department's stewardship of AFBI including its Organisational Action Plan to my Deputy Secretary for Strategic Planning and Corporate Services.

In her role as Principal Accounting Officer, my Permanent Secretary is also establishing a **Senior Partnership and Governance Board** immediately to provide both of us with assurance that AFBI is delivering its services safely and effectively.

That board will meet before the end of this month, assess the evidence provided by AFBI, and report back without delay.

It will then meet quarterly, or more frequently if required.

AFBI must provide evidence of the actions taken, the controls now in place for biosafety, laboratory working practices, and the timescales for completion of any outstanding measures.

The Chief Veterinary Officer has already requested that the Health and Safety Executive, Great Britain engage with AFBI and my officials on the action plan in response to the HSE GB inspection and will carry out a follow-up inspection within the next two months.

At that stage I fully expect to see the required improvements in place and operating effectively, supported by clear evidence and assurance.

I am confident that, through the actions I have set out, we can ensure AFBI delivers the high-quality services that our farmers, industry and public rightly expect.

Thank you