

Review of Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)

Departmental Response



Department of

**Agriculture, Environment
and Rural Affairs**

An Roinn

**Talmhaíochta, Comhshaoil
agus Gnóthaí Tuaithe**

Department o'

**Fairmin, Environment
an' Kintra Matthers**

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Introduction

This paper provides the Department's response to the findings and recommendations made in relation to the review of the Agri Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI).

Background

In line with Department of Finance guidance (The Public Bodies Guide: A Guide for Northern Ireland Departments), an independent review of AFBI was commissioned by the Department and was undertaken by the consultancy firm Baker Tilly Mooney Moore (BTMM).

Commencing in July 2024 the review was carried out in line with Managing Public Money (NI) requirements, with its primary purpose to assure the public, the Minister, and the Department's Principal Accounting Officer that AFBI's functions are still required, are being delivered effectively, and that the AFBI delivery model remains appropriate.

The review also provided an opportunity to assess independently the efficiency and effectiveness of the body, and to recommend improvements to governance, delivery, and value for money where these were identified.

The periodic review of arm's length bodies (ALBs) is a core requirement of good public governance in the UK. According to Cabinet Office guidance, including the 'Public Bodies Review Programme' (2022), such reviews are intended to ensure that ALBs remain efficient, effective, and accountable, and that their functions continue to be necessary and aligned with government priorities. The last review of AFBI was undertaken in 2017/18, and the current review aligns with the Cabinet Office's updated guidance.

Methodology and Reporting

The methodology used by the review team at the time the review was undertaken included several key stages:

1. **Current State Analysis:** This involved a desktop review of key documents (policy, strategy, financial, governance, and performance data), a policy and environmental review, and a PESTLEO analysis to understand the external context. A series of

interviews and workshops with DAERA and AFBI staff, board members, and a wide range of stakeholders to gather qualitative and quantitative evidence were also held.

2. **Stakeholder Engagement:** Extensive consultations were held with internal and external stakeholders, including surveys and facilitated workshops, to assess the effectiveness of AFBI's current delivery model and to gather feedback on future options.
3. **Organisation Assessment:** Using performance indicators from the Cabinet Office guidance and the Public Sector Research Establishment (PSRE) Value Framework, the review team assessed AFBI's mission, impact, additional value, and future opportunities. This included benchmarking against comparable organisations in the UK and Ireland.
4. **Workforce and Capability Review:** AFBI's workforce, skills, and capability were mapped, identifying gaps and future requirements, with a gap analysis conducted to inform recommendations.
5. **Analysis and Reporting:** The evidence gathered was analysed against the four quadrants of the Cabinet Office framework—efficacy, governance, accountability, and efficiency.

The review team provided a formal report to the Department in February 2025, with the Department and AFBI Board and management subsequently considering the report's findings and responses to the recommendations made. While work on considering the findings and recommendations had already started to address a number of these, the response now published includes consideration of matters that have since come to the attention of the AFBI Board and management and that were the subject of Minister Muir's oral statement of 14 April.

The full report should be read in conjunction with this Departmental Response. The Minister's statement of 14 April can be accessed through this [link](#).

Context

The Department's response to the review report reflects and takes account of the strategic context in which both DAERA and AFBI operate. The current and future policy landscape is complex with a myriad of issues facing the Department and wider society across Northern Ireland, including in areas such as improving water and air quality; tackling climate change; ensuring animal and plant health; supporting a sustainable agri-food sector; and supporting resilient rural communities, all of which contribute towards supporting the One Health approach.

The very nature of the policy landscape within which DAERA is operating means that robust data, science, and evidence is critical to assessing where we are, what good looks like, and creating roadmaps with sets of interventions to get there. However, the Department cannot do this alone. The complex policy challenges we face require collaboration with our partners and stakeholders to find solutions. As our primary science provider, AFBI is a key partner in this work and plays a critical role in providing that data, science, and evidence. Therefore, it is vital that AFBI is able to demonstrate high standards of professionalism, research integrity, data management, and technical proficiency.

The current operating context for AFBI has been clearly articulated by Minister Muir in his oral statement to the Assembly on 14 April 2026. In his statement, the Minister reaffirmed the critical role AFBI plays in protecting animal and public health, safeguarding the agri-food economy, and providing the scientific and diagnostic capability underpinning policy development.

At the same time, he set out a number of issues that had more recently been raised in relation to biosafety, laboratory working practices, data security, as well as some specific concerns relating to farm operations.

In response to these issues, the Minister has put in place increased, timebound, departmental oversight of AFBI, and the AFBI Board has commenced, in collaboration with the AFBI Executive Management Team, the development of an overarching Organisational Action Plan.

It is intended that enhanced oversight, including strengthened sponsorship, governance and assurance arrangements, will move to more normal oversight arrangements once there is agreed delivery of the objectives of the Organisational Action Plan, underpinned by evidence.

Both the Department and AFBI recognise that our partnership must be one built on trust, collaboration, openness, and a commitment to provide high quality scientific advice to help inform policy decisions. In delivering the actions in this response and as part of the Organisational Action Plan, referred to above, DAERA and AFBI need to be able to demonstrate with confidence that AFBI is delivering the functions conferred on it by statute in a way that also supports the Executive's Programme for Government and the priorities of DAERA's ministers. In turn, the Department recognises the role that it must play in addressing the issues identified in the review and providing AFBI with the support necessary to allow the Institute to reach its potential.

Response to the review

In this context, the Department still considers that the review provides assurance that AFBI's strategic direction is aligned with the priorities of the Executive and the DAERA Minister, and that, at the time of the review, governance, stewardship and assurance arrangements were assessed as being sound, with AFBI considered to be discharging its primary statutory functions in an effective and efficient manner. Those findings remain an important component of the overall evidence base. The report also provided a recurring theme of clarity of purpose and concludes that AFBI's purpose is not sufficiently clear. Its findings also challenge the Department to address an identified lack of clarity in setting out its expectations for AFBI and in its approach to commissioning work from AFBI. Strong leadership and commitment to full partnership working from both the Department and AFBI will be key to addressing these findings.

The review's conclusions must also be considered alongside the three immediate challenges the Minister, in his statement on 14 April, has set for AFBI:

HSE Inspection Report - 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 under the Specified Animal Pathogens Order is consistently carried out safely, effectively and in full

compliance with required standards, and that governance throughout the organisation is robust. This means having a clear, agreed, timebound action plan with rigorous board-level oversight to ensure progress is secured.

Setting Direction - the AFBI Board needs to articulate a clearer strategic direction for the organisation, ensuring that effort and investment are closely aligned with statutory obligations and the Minister's priorities with a clearer link between investment and impact.

Hillsborough Farm - in light of concerns previously raised about animal welfare and environmental practice at the AFBI farm, it is important the AFBI Board continues to provide rigorous oversight and clear assurance that farm operations meet the highest standards and that any learning is embedded.

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Options for change

The review team set out in its report a number of possible future state options which it has suggested the Department could consider, each with identified advantages and disadvantages. These options range from keeping the organisation the same to splitting AFBI into separate entities, focusing solely on animal health, or merging research functions with other institutions.

The Department has taken time to consider these options for the delivery of AFBI functions and services, particularly in the changing and challenging context outlined above.

Recognising the current challenges and disruption associated with wholesale structural change and the associated resource costs, legislative requirements and a shortened Assembly mandate, the Minister initially decided not to progress structural change. He has reviewed and confirmed that decision more recently, recognising that the upheaval associated with legislative and structural change will not be useful and time and space is

required for both AFBI and DAERA to put in place the work needed to address the key recommendations made in the review.

Such structural change, however, is not being ruled out in the future, particularly if there is insufficient progress in addressing the areas of change identified as being needed in the review and/or if there is insufficient evidence of tangible positive outcomes being realised from the programme of work now being put in place.

Addressing the here and now

In a context where structural change is not currently being progressed, the priority of the Department is to therefore ensure progress is made in responding to the five recommendations made in the report.

In considering the response to the recommendations, all of which have been accepted by both DAERA and AFBI, the focus therefore is on prioritising a manageable number of strategic actions that will deliver improvements while also reflecting the challenging and changing context within which the Department and AFBI operate, including the challenging future public expenditure position.

The Department has set out its response to each review recommendation below. This response is supported by a strategic action plan, organised under four key themes, which sets out the actions that will be undertaken to address the recommendations.

The actions set out have been developed in conjunction with the AFBI Board which, supported by the AFBI top leadership team, is also committed to playing its full part in delivering the progress now required. Similarly, the Department is fully committed to working in partnership with AFBI in delivering those actions which fall to it.

Recommendation One – Assurance on Lengthening the Arm

Recommendation:

It is our view that relationships need to be underpinned by a systematic approach to assurance. We believe that there are two broad aspects of assurance which AFBI and DAERA need to address:

- an assurance that AFBI is performing satisfactorily against the objectives, targets and performance measures agreed by Ministers – the ‘controllability’ dimension of accountability and the starting point for ‘controllability’ is establishing what success looks like for AFBI.
- secondly, an assurance that the body is meeting the requirements of legislation and guidance – the ‘transparency’ and ‘responsibility’ dimensions of accountability.

The recommendation follows that AFBI should continue to develop and embed its approach to governance, reporting and performance. This will continue to build confidence in DAERA that AFBI’s performance and reporting is transparent and there is a sense of being held fully to account. This allows the Accounting Officer in DAERA and others to progress forwards with increased confidence and assurance and therefore the current short arm approach to oversight begins to lengthen and AFBI begins to feel less controlled.

Departmental Response

We accept this recommendation and recognise the need to refine and strengthen the assurance system that exists between DAERA and AFBI. With a Programme for Government (PfG) and the DAERA corporate plan now in place, there is greater certainty around Executive and ministerial priorities, which brings with it an improved ability to plan for the future.

Following recent developments as set out in the Minister’s 14 April statement, temporary measures have been implemented to strengthen departmental oversight and accountability. DAERA has requested that AFBI develop a comprehensive Organisational Action Plan, approved by the AFBI Board. Senior DAERA officials will collaborate with AFBI to support the creation and monitoring of the Organisational Action Plan, applying enhanced stewardship and governance to ensure AFBI is accountable for meeting agreed actions, milestones, and delivery requirements.

In the longer term and in response to the recommendation made by the review team about lengthening the arm, the Department will take action to build on the governance systems already in place, with a view to pivoting to a model with a greater focus on delegation, assurance and accountability, that is, moving in the longer term to a model which gives AFBI greater flexibility while ensuring clear accountability for the results it delivers.

This transition will be taken forward once the governance, assurance and compliance issues set out in the Minister's recent statement have been addressed to the Department's satisfaction and the necessary evidence-based assurances are in place. Subject to this, the revised model should allow the Department to proceed with increased confidence in how AFBI is delivering its key functions, while providing AFBI with an appropriate level of independence and flexibility in the work it undertakes.

We will also take action to agree a clearer set of outcome-focused metrics through which the work of AFBI and its real-world impact can be measured and reported.

Recommendation Two – Defining Partnership Working

Recommendation:

Accounting Officers should ensure that the current Partnership Agreement between DAERA and AFBI is fully transparent, that roles and responsibilities are as clear as possible, but above all that the wording, language and phraseology used in the framework document is accepted and agreed to ensure a shared understanding.

In the NIAO Code of Practice Partnerships between Departments and Arm's Length Bodies (March 2019), the fifth principle is about engagement and suggests that partnerships work well when relationships between departments and Arm's Length Bodies are open, honest, constructive, and based on trust. There is a mutual understanding about each other's objectives and clear expectations about terms of engagement.

- The Department needs to re-visit its own role and responsibilities as set out in Partnership Agreement and ensure that it has in place the necessary mechanisms and processes to support and engage with AFBI. This requires DAERA supporting its public appointees; creating and maintaining effective communication channels with identified key AFBI staff; providing guidance and support as well as setting stretch strategic objectives (and monitoring these) for AFBI to strive for a new vista and vision.
- A stable Sponsor team needs to continue developing the AFBI relationship and adopt a partnership approach to delivery and put in place a framework to develop more effective communication.
- For its part AFBI must recognise the role and contribution Sponsor team has in AFBI development and holding to account and must work collegiately with the Department in reaching its objectives.

Departmental Response

We accept this recommendation and recognise the importance of a clear, transparent, and collaborative partnership between DAERA and AFBI. To address this, DAERA will work closely with AFBI to review and update the Partnership Agreement and Engagement Plan, and other key governance documents, ensuring that roles, responsibilities, and expectations are clearly defined and mutually understood. This process will involve co-design through open dialogue and consultation with key stakeholders from both organisations, with the aim of fostering a culture of trust and developing constructive engagement and shared objectives.

The Minister's 14 April statement has reinforced the importance of strengthening partnership working and engagement between the Department and AFBI, underpinned by clearer governance, stewardship and assurance arrangements. In response, and to support delivery

of the Organisational Action Plan, a Senior Partnership, Governance and Oversight Board (SPGOB) has been established to provide enhanced oversight and assurance that AFBI is delivering its services safely, effectively and in full compliance with required standards.

Recommendation Three – Assigned Work Programme (AWP)

Recommendation:

DAERA urgently needs to dedicate time and resources to reviewing the effectiveness of the AWP and review all aspects of how the Department commissions, contracts and monitors these services. The current process is ineffective and needs fundamental change. The underlying philosophy of commissioning has also changed over time within wider public sector with a move away from transactional models and towards greater partnership working. These changes are intended to support the development of a more integrated approach and focus on five core areas; assessing needs; setting priorities; planning services; procuring services and monitoring quality. It is incumbent upon DAERA to refresh the current model and adopt a new approach which reflects needs and is effective, efficient and demonstrates a better understanding of its own science service needs.

Departmental Response

We accept this recommendation and recognise the opportunities for improvement in the current Assigned Work Programme (AWP) model which includes commissioning of both Scientific Services and Research & Development work.

DAERA will urgently review the existing AWP model drawing on best practice from elsewhere and, in conjunction with AFBI, develop and implement a revised approach which meets the needs of both organisations, builds on the partnership approach, and supports the delivery of high-quality science. This must include regular strategic and meaningful engagement between both organisations at senior levels and robust prioritisation of DAERA's requirements. The Department will also work with AFBI to ensure a greater focus on outcomes and impacts.

The Department is also undertaking work to review its approach to wider science commissioning. This work will streamline the overall commissioning processes while increasing the level of governance and accountability to ensure the Department can access the best science; the best value from science; and makes the best use of that science.

Recommendation Four – Demonstrating Impact

Recommendation:

DAERA and AFBI should agree, in line with the Partnership Agreement, more detailed strategic objectives for AFBI that include indicators and timelines for measurement.

AFBI should strengthen its monitoring and evaluation of its research outputs and impact, through more robust and longer-term impact reporting and a more rigorous approach to sharing evaluations and lessons learned internally and externally. This could include for example, an external peer assessment every five years.

Departmental Response

We accept this recommendation and recognise the importance of demonstrating the impact of AFBI's science and the role that robust monitoring, evaluation, and effective communication plays in ensuring that the benefits of scientific research are fully realised and understood by all stakeholders, including the wider public. To this end, there is important work to be done to ensure AFBI is clearly communicating the importance of its scientific research, particularly how its work can provide insight and can help inform and influence agricultural practices, environmental sustainability, greenhouse gas reduction, nitrate and ammonia management, disease eradication and testing, as well as food safety assurance. To support this work, increased stakeholder engagement is recognised as key - the creation of a Farmers' Forum will be an important step in achieving this, and similar structures will be replicated to engage other important stakeholders.

Additionally, it is considered that the development of corporate and business plans by both DAERA and AFBI over the past few years marks a significant step forward in securing better strategic alignment. The publication of the AFBI Science Strategy 2030 in September 2025 and the ongoing development of the DAERA first set of Areas of Research Interest (ARIs) and Evidence Plans is already helping to ensure that there is a solid alignment between policy and research needs.

AFBI is also developing a comprehensive Peer Review Protocol, which will set out a framework for the periodic external assessment of its research and scientific services programmes. The introduction of the protocol will directly address the review's recommendation for more rigorous monitoring and evaluation and will help ensure that

AFBI's research activities are not only of high quality but are also demonstrably impactful and widely communicated.

Recommendation Five – Driving Effectiveness

Recommendation:

AFBI should, as a matter of urgency, support ongoing work to draw up a strategic workforce plan, as well as efforts to develop leadership capability (including talent management) across the organisation.

DAERA and AFBI prioritise IT system enhancements to enable progress against the IT Strategy and improve data usage to inform and drive change.

The review team recommend that progress is made in the scoping and finalisation of the Strategic Cost Model with full transparency on core costs. Further progress should be made in the funding model for AFBI based on core funding for essential costs and costs for commissioned work.

Dependent upon the outcome of this review and the progress of an identified and preferred option, the Review of Estates which was finalised and agreed by both DAERA and AFBI in August 2024, should ensure future state AFBI has more control and flexibility in its estate cost, management and development.

We recommend that AFBI review its Board Committee structure to ensure the current model is appropriate and meets current and anticipated future AFBI needs. We strongly recommend a review of the necessity of the Oversight and Governance Committee and the strengthening of the Organisational Development and Human Resources Committee to ensure a more HR focus (with particular lens on workforce data and metrics).

Departmental Response

We accept this recommendation and recognise the importance of supporting AFBI in its drive towards improved organisational effectiveness and thereby delivering on its strategic ambitions.

To address this recommendation:

- AFBI will develop a comprehensive Strategic Workforce Plan to ensure the organisation has the skills, leadership, and talent management needed for the future.
- AFBI will invest in staff engagement, training and wellbeing initiatives to foster a culture that best supports its staff to achieve its priorities.
- AFBI, with support from DAERA, will continue to progress and further expand the significant body of work already underway to upgrade IT systems and data infrastructure to improve operational efficiency and scientific delivery, supported by a 5-year Digital, Data and Technology Strategy.

- AFBI will finalise its Strategic Cost Model to ensure value for money and appropriate resource allocation.
- DAERA, in conjunction with AFBI, will implement the recommendations from the Strategic Review of AFBI Land and Property Holdings, investing in infrastructure such as new research facilities and laboratories.
- The Ruminant Emissions Research (RERF) Facility and the Animal Health Sciences Building (AHSB) which are being progressed will deliver much needed improvements.
- AFBI has reviewed its board committee structure to address the issues raised in the review, and the Board is content that there is no unnecessary duplication. This will be examined as part of the upcoming external review of Board Effectiveness which will be undertaken from June 2026.

Action Plan

Theme:		Improving governance and partnership working			
Ref No.	Action	Rationale	Link to Recommendation	Lead	Timescale
1	DAERA and AFBI will establish and operate a strategic forum to provide leadership and direction at senior levels.	This will ensure there is ongoing collaboration and engagement on key strategic issues and science priorities.	One – Assurance on Lengthening the Arm Two -Defining Partnership Working Three – AWP	DAERA AFBI CEO	30 June 2026
2	DAERA and AFBI will review the DAERA/AFBI Partnership Agreement and Engagement Plan with a focus on improving strategic focus and working towards providing AFBI with greater delegation and flexibility.	This will give both organisations an opportunity to re-assess the partnership arrangement and find ways to improve governance while also providing an opportunity to give AFBI greater operating independence and autonomy in determining how best to achieve its goals.	One – Assurance on Lengthening the Arm Two – Defining Partnership Working	DAERA AFBI CEO	31 December 2026
3	DAERA will review and update its sponsorship framework for AFBI and ensure an appropriate framework for partnership working and sponsorship is in place between DAERA and AFBI.	A strong framework for sponsorship is key to the DAERA/AFBI partnership. A review of key sponsorship and governance arrangements and structures underpinning this relationship will support a through revaluation of the current framework and identify opportunities for improvement.	Two – Defining Partnership Working Three - AWP	DAERA	31 December 2026

Review of Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)

Theme:		Improving Science Commissioning			
Ref No.	Action	Rationale	Link to Recommendation	Lead	Timescale
4	AFBI and DAERA will implement a streamlined AWP commissioning model covering both scientific services and research with longer-term planning horizons (e.g. 3–5 years) and more focus on both outcomes and impact.	This will enhance AFBI's autonomy in determining its scientific programmes, while also strengthening accountability for ensuring that departmental priorities are fully addressed. It will also streamline the AWP process, reduce administrative burden while focusing on outcomes, impacts, and deliverables.	One – Assurance on Lengthening the Arm Three – AWP	DAERA AFBI CEO	31 March 2027
5	DAERA will deliver the Digitising Science Commissioning Project to meet the Department's science needs as a whole.	The Digitising Science Commissioning Project will use software to create a science commissioning system capable of meeting future needs.	Three – AWP	DAERA	31 December 2028

Review of Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)

Theme:		Demonstrating Impact			
Ref No.	Action	Rationale	Link to Recommendation	Lead	Timescale
6	The Department will finalise the DAERA Impact Framework and work with AFBI to ensure its impacts reporting are aligned.	Both DAERA and AFBI recognise that understanding the impacts of science is key to ensuring that the science it commissions and delivers aids policy making decisions, delivers value for money, and ultimately influences behaviours and outcomes.	Four – Demonstrating Impact	DAERA	31 March 2027
7	AFBI will implement a model for external peer assessments.	This will provide external validation of the quality of science delivered by AFBI which will ensure its robustness and credibility.	Four – Demonstrating Impact	AFBI CEO	31 December 2026
8	AFBI to develop and implement a Strategic Stakeholder Engagement Strategy.	This will help to promote effective communication, engagement, and understanding of the impact of AFBI science among key stakeholders.	Four – Demonstrating Impact	AFBI CEO	31 March 2027

Review of Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI)

Theme:		Driving effectiveness			
Ref No.	Action	Rationale	Link to Recommendation	Lead	Timescale
9	<p>AFBI will undertake a number of projects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development and implementation of a comprehensive Strategic Workforce Plan. • Implementation of a new Strategic Cost Model • Development of a 5-year Digital Data and Technology (DDaT) Strategy. • Carry out a Board Effectiveness review to consider committee structure. 	These projects will drive organisation improvement and effectiveness.	Five – Driving Effectiveness	AFBI CEO	31 March 2027
10	DAERA with support from AFBI, will take forward the implementation of the Strategic Review of AFBI Land and Property Holdings.	This will ensure AFBI has fit for purpose science facilities to deliver the science services required.	Five – Driving Effectiveness	DAERA	31 March 2027* ¹

¹ The Strategic Review of AFBI Land and Property Holdings sets out a 20-year strategy; however, it is anticipated that by 31 March 2027 implementation will have commenced and options for Loughgall will have been developed, enabling progress to be reported against this date for the purposes of the above action plan.

Monitoring

In preparing this response, careful consideration was given to how the progress against the actions required will be monitored and how, ultimately, the successful implementation of the recommendations will be evaluated. It is essential that robust governance arrangements are in place to achieve this and to maintain accountability throughout the process.

Effective oversight will help to guarantee that all actions are delivered on schedule, resources are used efficiently, and any challenges are addressed promptly.

Initially, the Senior Partnership, Governance and Oversight Board (SPGOB) will oversee the implementation of the actions arising from this response to the review's recommendations. This will be done as part of the overall development and implementation of the Organisational Action Plan. The SPGOB is comprised of senior executives in both DAERA and AFBI and will play a key role in ensuring clear lines of ownership between implementation and reporting. The SPGOB will meet regularly to review progress, address issues, and provide direction where necessary.

As the SPGOB is intended to be a temporary measure, when the time is right monitoring of implementation of any outstanding actions will be continued through business-as-usual governance and accountability mechanisms.

Throughout this process, the DAERA Minister, the AFBI Board and the DAERA and AFBI Audit and Risk Assurance Committees (ARAC) will receive regular updates on the progress of implementation. These updates will provide assurance that implementation of actions remains on track, and that emerging issues and risks are addressed promptly to ensure that they do not impede progress in making the improvements required.