

Candidate Information Booklet

Chief Executive

Salary: £113,060 - £123,946 per annum
Plus an employer pension contribution of 34.25%

Competition Reference Number: E0001/26
Closing date for applications:
12 noon, Friday 30 January 2026

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Foreword

The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) of Northern Ireland is an Arm's Length Body of the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

The Institute carries out research, and provides surveillance and emergency response capability in support of public policy, operating across a range of areas including sustainable agriculture and fisheries, animal and plant health, and safeguarding terrestrial and marine environments. Integrated capabilities across these domains, capitalising on their interdependence as per the One Health paradigm, enables the Institute to make significant contributions to society in Northern Ireland, while playing a part in providing solutions to global challenges. Funding from our Sponsor Department is complemented by external funding from a range of public and private sector organisations.

The AFBI Board now seeks applications for the role of CEO to succeed Dr. Stanley McDowell, who has announced his retirement. The Board seeks to recruit a transformative leader who will ensure the Institute fulfils its potential as a dynamic, agile science organisation, capable of attracting and retaining ambitious staff who are committed to making a difference.



Grace Mulcahy
Chair, Agri-Food and
Biosciences Institute

Thank you for your interest in this competition.

Candidates should have the experience and track-record required to lead the >650 AFBI staff, and manage significant annual revenue of more than £60 million. Hays Executive Search are working with us in this recruitment process. We welcome applications from individuals capable of inspiring trust internally and externally, of leading large, multi-disciplinary scientific activities, and of establishing and maintaining productive and collaborative relationships with the Sponsor Department, stakeholders from relevant industries, and other public and private sector partners. Applicants should be capable of embracing change, articulating an ambitious vision for the Institute, seeing new opportunities, embracing emerging technologies, and being resilient in the face of challenges. Further information is provided in this booklet.

About AFBI

The Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) is a leading scientific organisation supporting government, industry, and society.



**Delivering science
that makes a real,
positive difference
for Northern Ireland
and beyond.**

AFBI delivers research and development, diagnostic and analytical testing, emergency response capability and expert scientific advice for DAERA and other government departments, public bodies and commercial entities in Northern Ireland, and further afield. The Institute delivers trusted, independent research, statutory & surveillance science, and expert advice that addresses local and global challenges, informs government policy and industry decision making, and underpins a sustainable agri-food industry while safeguarding terrestrial and marine environments. Its scientific work covers agriculture, animal health and welfare, food,

fisheries, forestry, the natural environment, and rural development, unified under a One Health approach, and utilising the power of data analytics.

With headquarters at Newforge Lane, Belfast, and facilities at six other sites (Stormont, Crossnacreevy, Hillsborough, Loughgall, Omagh and Bushmills), AFBI currently employs >650 staff. Major capital investments underway include a new Marine Research Vessel, the Jocelyn Bell Burnell, expected to be launched in Belfast Harbour in 2027 (to replace the RV Corystes), as well as the progression of a new Animal Health Sciences building at the Stormont site.



Our AFBI Sites

We operate across a network of sites, each providing specialist capabilities that support our diverse programmes of work:

- **Newforge Lane (Headquarters):** Home to AFBI's central functions and the primary base for environment and marine sciences, economics, and plant health.
- **Stormont:** Our main laboratory platform, focused on animal health, veterinary sciences, and food safety.
- **Hillsborough:** AFBI's principal agricultural and land-based research platform, supporting research in livestock, land management, and sustainable farming systems.

- **Crossnacreevy and Loughgall:** Smaller land-based research sites supporting plant science, crop research, and field-based experimentation.

- **Omagh:** A dedicated Veterinary Investigation Centre providing specialist diagnostic and investigative services.

- **Bushmills:** A fisheries site shared with DAERA, supporting key marine and freshwater research activities.

In addition, we have the RV *Corystes*, our purpose-built, 53-metre marine research vessel operating from the Port of Belfast, extending AFBI's scientific capabilities offshore.

Our Impact

AFBI science is critical to Northern Ireland's (NI) **long term economic and environmental sustainability**, contributing to the protection of our terrestrial and marine environment.

AFBI scientists lead improvements in our agri-food systems, helping protect animal and plant health, and ensuring the safety of the food that we eat.

By delivering essential statutory testing, monitoring and surveillance programmes, research and development work, as well as emergency response capability and expert scientific advice, AFBI scientists enable the NI agri-food industry to market products nationally and internationally while ensuring long term environmental sustainability, from soil to sea.

Our Vision, Purpose and Strategic Priorities

The Vision, Purpose and current Strategic Priorities of the Institute are set out in our 2023-2027 Corporate Strategy.

Our Corporate Strategy reflects the strength of the organisation to address some of society's largest challenges through scientific excellence and the impact this science aims to have on society, our economy and the environment.

Our Vision

Scientific excellence delivering impactful and sustainable outcomes for society, economy and the natural environment.

Our Purpose

To deliver trusted, independent research, statutory & surveillance science, and expert advice that addresses local and global challenges, informs government policy and industry decision making, and underpins a sustainable agri-food industry and the natural and marine environments.

Our Strategic Priorities

01 Leading improvements in the agri-food industry to enhance its sustainability

02 Delivering quality outcomes and impact

03 Protecting animal, plant and human health



04 Enhancing the natural and marine environment



05 Enabling world class science through excellence in people, places and technology

Organisation Structure

The Institute has three Science Divisions along with a Finance and Corporate Affairs Division.

1 Sustainable Agri-Food Sciences Division (SAFSD)

SAFSD is a highly multi-disciplinary Division with a focus on livestock, plant and general agriculture production, its impact on the environment and the economy.

This multi-disciplinary team is sited across AFBI Newforge, Hillsborough, Loughgall and Crossnacreevy and conducts science across all aspects of the food supply chain, taking research from the soil through to the plant, the animal and the resultant food quality and nutritional value, while also working with colleagues at VSD to ensure animal health and food safety is optimised. A key element of the work also examines quantitative and qualitative socio-economic impacts.

SAFSD utilises a highly instrumented platform across livestock and land management to service its main deliverables of research and innovation and monitoring and surveillance. SAFSD also collaborates extensively with other research organisations, industry and government departments locally, nationally and internationally.

A key drive within SAFSD is to produce high quality peer-reviewed publications while also ensuring the research conducted has impact through an active dissemination programme.

2 Environment and Marine Sciences Division (EMSD)

EMSD comprises of two areas, Agri-Environment Branch and Fisheries and Aquatic Ecosystems Branch. Agri-Environment Branch works at the interfaces between livestock production, and environmental management and regulation, which includes the impacts of agricultural land use practices on soil, water and air and identifies ways of optimising land-based livestock production.

Fisheries and Aquatic Ecosystems Branch conducts research and development, monitoring and technology transfer in fisheries stock assessment. This includes: coastal zone science, biological oceanography, marine ecology, and freshwater fisheries stock assessment.

The Division is focused on evidence-based science, which is key to addressing the significant environmental challenges whilst ensuring the sustainable use of natural resources and the future prosperity of the agri-food sector. The Division is in a unique position to deliver on a high impact and quality integrated programmes of research spanning from the soil to the sea.

3 Veterinary Sciences Division (VSD)

VSD currently employs veterinary, scientific, technical and support staff and is predominantly based at Stoney Road, Belfast with a smaller disease surveillance centre based at Omagh, Co. Tyrone.

The Division undertakes an integrated programme of statutory, disease surveillance, emergency response and research & development (R&D) work on the diseases of major animal and public health significance, along with significant programmes of work on the chemical and microbiological safety of food.

The work supports government policy and disease eradication and control programmes in areas such as bovine tuberculosis, food-borne zoonotic infections and transboundary diseases.

One of the key roles of the Division is in delivering a laboratory response to local, national and international emergencies involving animal diseases, and food and feed contamination incidents.

VSD also provides a disease investigation service covering all the major farm animal species and fish, and provides commercial laboratory services in support of disease eradication and control programmes.

The work of the Division is underpinned by research and development R&D on animal diseases and food safety issues relevant to the local industry.

4 Finance and Corporate Affairs Division (FCAD)

FCAD is responsible for the management of AFBI's finance and corporate functions and underpins the delivery of the Institute's scientific services.

The Division has responsibility for leading and providing the support services across the Institute including finance, governance and performance, information systems, research support, corporate communications, human resources, health and safety, estates and emergency planning.



Chief Executive

**Analogous to Senior Civil Service Grade 3
£113,060 - £123,946 per annum**

Key Responsibilities

The person appointed will be able to articulate and implement an ambitious vision for the Institute, leading the Executive Management Team and staff of AFBI to ensure its continued development as a science-led organisation across the areas of its remit.

Key priorities include development of innovative career structures designed to recruit and retain talented scientists and science-enablers, renewing the Institute's data capability to ensure it is fit for purpose, and continued strategic development of the AFBI Estate.

The AFBI Chief Executive is accountable to the Board for all aspects of AFBI's work, and for maintaining the high standards of corporate governance necessary to deliver the Institute's scientific mission. They will be capable of maintaining productive relationships with a wide range of stakeholders, including the Sponsor Department, AFBI staff, users of science

services, relevant industry bodies and other science organisations and public sector bodies.

As Accounting Officer, the Chief Executive is, in addition, personally responsible for ensuring that AFBI has a robust corporate governance framework which ensures propriety, regularity, value for money and the safeguarding of public funds. This is to provide sufficient assurance to the Board and the Permanent Secretary/Departmental Accounting Officer enabling them to have confidence in the effectiveness of AFBI's systems of internal control.

Accounting Officer responsibilities include ensuring AFBI has in place an effective suite of management, procurement, corporate and business planning, performance management and reporting, human resource management, risk management, information assurance, security, asset management and internal audit tools which inform their Annual Governance Statement.



The Chief Executive will

- Provide dynamic leadership in furthering AFBI's strategic direction, and maintaining the highest standards of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality across all the Institute's activities.
- Drive a culture of high performance, with a programme of continuous improvement and innovative thinking.
- Develop the capacity, capability and performance of the team through implementing policies and practices to implement AFBI's vision, mission, and corporate planning objectives.
- Ensure appropriate balance and synergy between the various activities of the Institute, and between its commitments to the Sponsoring Department and complementary opportunities to deploy its science for the public good.
- Further build partnerships and networks with cognate science delivery organisations, and with relevant funders, nationally and further afield.
- Deploy mechanisms, including robust peer-review, to ensure AFBI science, and the strategic development of its workstreams, delivers the best possible outcomes and impacts for Northern Ireland.
- Maintain robust systems of internal control and governance.
- Carry out any other duties that may be assigned by the Board.

In providing evidence, it will be essential that candidates draw upon specific examples of work they have undertaken to illustrate the extent to which they possess the experience and skills required. It will not be sufficient simply to list the duties and responsibilities of posts held.

***Senior Management** level includes being an integral part of an Executive Management Team, providing detailed advice to a Board and its committees or equivalent or taking decisions with particular emphasis on governance, accountability, financial management and providing strategic advice and guidance.

Eligibility Criteria

Applicants must, by the closing date for applications, have:

- A minimum of three years' experience in senior management* of a multi-disciplinary organisation comparable in size and complexity with AFBI.
- Demonstrated leadership skills and experience in a complex organisation, encompassing the ability to inspire, build trust, and influence staff and external stakeholders.
- Demonstrated ability to foster collaborative working relationships, internally and externally.
- Experience of the effective and efficient management of resources, governance, business and financial planning, risk management, commercial acumen and value for money.
- A track-record in change management, setting priorities, and continuous improvement to enhance organisational performance.
- Knowledge and an appreciation of the public sector, and of science informed policy context in areas of the Institute's remit.
- Excellent interpersonal skills including the ability to communicate effectively to diverse audiences.
- Demonstration of resilience in the face of challenges.

Key Terms & Conditions



Salary

The salary scale for this role can be found within the Job Description. NB: You will be an employee of AFBI and not The Northern Ireland Civil Service.

Annual Leave & Public Holidays

We provide a generous annual leave allowance of 30 days. In addition, all employees are entitled to 12 days public/privilege holidays each year.

Probationary Periods

Appointment is subject to the satisfactory completion of a 12 month probationary period.

Pension

We offer an unrivalled pension scheme that will help you beyond your employment with us. All permanent AFBI staff are enrolled into the Northern Ireland Civil Service Scheme from their first day of employment. There is no qualifying or waiting period. Staff contribute between 4.65 and 8.25% of salary and AFBI contribute a further 34.25% of salary, depending on your rate of pay. Pension contributions are collected before tax, so you also get tax relief at your marginal tax rate on the contributions you pay.



Hybrid Working

AFBI has a hybrid working mechanism in place and strives to accommodate those who work in roles that can accommodate home working. The hybrid policy supports employees to have a mixed approach on each week, to work both in the office and at home.

Hours of Work

The full-time working week is 37 hours (excluding meal breaks), Monday to Friday.

You may be required on occasion to work outside normal office hours. Access to a form of transport for travel to all AFBI sites will be necessary. International travel may be required.

Benefits

Training

Appropriate training will be provided, where required, to enable the successful candidate to carry out the full range of assigned duties.

Learning & Development

AFBI actively engage with employees to encourage and support professional goals. We continuously develop our employees with a range of professional and personal development opportunities. Our corporate Learning and Development programme is open to all staff and consists of a number of formal and informal initiatives. In addition to corporate Learning and Development opportunities, AFBI will encourage you to be proactive and self-direct your own development.

Family-friendly Policies

AFBI has a range of family-friendly policies to allow staff to balance work with the other aspects of their lives. These include part-time working, jobsharing arrangements, flexible working and special leave provisions. AFBI provides maternity provisions, paternity, parental and adoption leave, many of which are provided at an enhanced rate beyond statutory entitlement.

Health & Wellbeing

We are committed to support each employee where we can throughout their journey with us. To support employees, we offer a number of initiatives, including workplace health checks, cost towards flu vaccinations, Occupational Health Services, and the provision of trained Mental Health First Aiders.

Sick Entitlement

We recognise that throughout our lifetime we may experience ill-health. To support you financially and to alleviate stress while recovering from ill-health, AFBI offers a generous sick entitlement to support you until you return to the workplace, fit and well.

Welfare Support

AFBI understands that there may be times when you may need independent advice and help coping with personal or work-related issues that may be affecting your ability to work effectively. To help you with these issues AFBI offer a confidential Welfare Support Service. AFBI also operates an Employee Assistance Programme, delivered through Inspire which provides free independent and confidential counselling, advice and support for any personal or work-related issues.

“ AFBI has policies to allow staff to balance work with the other aspects of their lives. ”

Benenden Healthcare

A mutual healthcare society which provides you and your family with access to affordable healthcare products, helping you to take control of your health and wellbeing. See link for more information: www.benenden.co.uk

Supported Volunteering

AFBI grant special leave with pay up to a maximum of three days on the condition that staff contribute an equivalent amount of their own leave (annual or flexi) to the same voluntary sector organisation for the purposes of volunteering. This is providing there is no adverse impact on official business and no conflict of interest.

Travel Initiatives

AFBI offer all staff the opportunity to partake in the Cycle to Work Pay and Reward Scheme. Under the Cycle to Work Scheme employees may 'sacrifice' part of their pay in exchange for the use of a bicycle and any associated safety equipment, with the potential to save money on Tax and National Insurance Contributions. AFBI has seven sites throughout Northern Ireland that all offer free convenient car parking.

Give As You Earn Scheme

AFBI support The Charity for Civil Servants, providing (financial) help and advice to serving and former staff of the Civil Service and associated organisations, including AFBI. More information can be viewed at the following link: www.foryoubbyou.org.uk

Death in Service Benefit

In addition to the contribution to your pension pot, the scheme also offers a range of benefits to you and your family while you are in work and when you retire. If you die in service, the scheme provides valuable life cover to your family in the form of a lump sum and a pension for your dependants. These pension arrangements form a valuable part of your remuneration package. For further information on the available pension options, please visit the Northern Ireland Civil Service Pensions Scheme website.

Appointment Process & Applicant Guidance



Communication

This competition is being managed by Hays Executive Search. Hays will issue competition communications electronically. Please ensure you check your email account regularly, to make sure that you don't miss any important communications. There may be a requirement to issue competition communications by post.

Please update us with any changes to your email address and home address to ensure you are fully informed at all times.

Equal Opportunities

AFBI is an equal opportunities employer and has been awarded the Diversity Mark Accreditation in recognition for our commitment towards Gender Diversity and Inclusion in the workplace.

All appointments will be made strictly on the basis of merit.

For information on right to work requirements, please click [here](#).

If you have any queries with regard to this recruitment process and require any reasonable adjustments or any documentation in an alternative format, please contact Hays Executive Search via:

E: elaine.mccullagh@hays.com

T: 028 9044 6911

Feedback - AFBI is committed to providing feedback upon request.

Indicative Timeline for Competition

Steps	Timeline
Advertise	9 January 2026
Closing Date	30 January 2026
1st Stage Interview followed by shortlisting	13 February 2026
Invitations issued for Assessment Centre (psychometric testing plus media exercise)	20 February 2026
2nd Stage Competency-Based Interview which includes a presentation	18 March 2026
Pre Offer, Right to Work Checks and Basic Security Clearance	23 March 2026
Unconditional Offer	As soon as clearance status is confirmed
Approximate start date	22 June 2026

2nd Stage Interview

Shortlisted applicants will be required to give a presentation to the selection panel, relevant to the Professional Knowledge and Skills dimension of the Competency Framework at Level 6. Further information on the competency framework can be accessed [here](#).

The specific topic of the presentation will be communicated to candidates in the interview invitation letter. Following the presentation, the panel may elect to ask questions on the presentation.

The presentation will be used to assess in part the "Seeing the Big Picture" competence.

Following the presentation, candidates will complete a competency-based interview designed to test knowledge and experience in each of the following areas, according to the marking framework.

1. Seeing the Big Picture
2. Changing and Improving
3. Collaborating and Partnering
4. Making Effective Decisions
5. Leading and Communicating



Contact

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**Thank you for your
interest in this role.**