

FROM: Name Redacted
BRANCH: AFBI SPONSOR BRANCH
CONTACT: Irrelevant & Sensitive

DATE: 09 APRIL 2020

TO: EDWIN POOTS MLA
MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE, ENVIRONMENT AND RURAL
AFFAIRS

**SUB/1227/2020 – AFBI SUPPORT FOR DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH - COVID-19
TESTING.**

SUMMARY

Issue: AFBI support for Department of Health -
COVID-19 testing.

Timing: Routine

SpAd Comments:

Financial Implications:* £1m (non-labour costs) for 12 weeks
testing – at 1000 tests per day

**Employment of External
Consultants Implications:** None

Legislation Implications:* None

Equality Implications: None

FOI Implications: Withheld under Section 35: Formulation of
Government Policy.

Rural Needs Implications: None

Executive Referral: No

Presentational Issues: None.

**Date Draft Press Release
cleared by Press Office:** Joint press release to follow

Recommendation: That you note this update on Covid-19
testing at AFBI.

BACKGROUND

1. The Agri-food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) is the main science provider for the Department of Agriculture Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). It is an arm's length body of the Department.
2. In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, AFBI agreed to provide assistance in whatever way possible and following discussions with both DAERA and the Department of Health it has been agreed that AFBI will assist with the testing process.
3. Testing will be carried out at AFBI's laboratory facility at Stormont. Work will be undertaken in line with ISO17025 standards although it is not intended to apply for formal accreditation.
4. A consortium has been established in NI led by the NI Pathology Network (public health labs etc.) and including the local universities (Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University) and AFBI to expand testing capacity.
5. AFBI estimates, for single shift testing at their facility, approximately 12 staff will be needed to cover extraction, polymerase chain (PCR) testing, results analysis and reporting. Some AFBI staff may also join a pool to assist the Health Lab in the local Health Trust.
6. AFBI is working to a planning assumption of being able to deliver up to 1000 tests per day at their site.
7. AFBI has provided estimated costs in respect of the procurement of pathogen extraction and PCR kits, PPE, consumables and peripherals at £1.05m for 12 weeks of testing at the above volume. This does not include labour costs or overheads.
8. A revised funding and approval process has been introduced by the Department of Finance which will accelerate the process. AFBI Sponsor Branch and Finance Division are working through the practicalities of these new arrangements to ensure, speed of delivery, appropriate accounting treatment and good governance.
9. The Permanent Secretary has approved the award of two direct award contracts for the provision of pathogen extraction and polymerase chain reaction (PCR) kits to cover the 12 week testing period.
10. Expenditure in respect of Covid-19 testing is ring-fenced and is in addition to AFBI's normal grant-in-aid funding. Accordingly AFBI has introduced accounting procedures and controls to ensure the appropriate reporting of this expenditure.
11. In line with overall government and NICS advice for only those staff essential to delivering key services to attend work, and to do so only where staff cannot work from home, DAERA and AFBI have agreed a series of changes to AFBI's

normal work functions. These have some impact on the DAERA work programme, the main implications of which are as follows:

a) Assigned Work Programme (Statutory and Non Statutory Science and Advice & Representation)

The Chief Veterinary Officer and AFBI have agreed a prioritisation framework for assigned work during this period. Priority 1 work areas include, for example, salmonella, brucellosis, tuberculosis, epizootics and transmissible spongiform encephalopathy. It is recognised that this is a work in progress and VSAHG will be in regular contact with AFBI colleagues throughout the coming days/weeks.

b) Assigned Work Programme (Evidence and Innovation)

The Chief Scientific Adviser's Office is working with AFBI to establish and mitigate the impact of the Covid-19 response on the DAERA Evidence and Innovation research programme. AFBI is currently undertaking an exercise with its research Projects Leads to forecast the implications of Covid-19 testing on the research and development programme as well as the wider impacts of Covid-19 on delivery. When this initial exercise is complete, we will ask AFBI to update an issues log so we can maintain visibility of impacts in the coming months.

12. The release of staff to work on Covid-19 testing is currently planned so as not to impact on the priority animal health and food safety testing programmes referred to at 11(a). This will however be kept under close review.
13. The overall financial impact of Covid-19 on AFBI is as yet unknown but it is expected that AFBI's non-DAERA income will suffer as result of not being able to fully deliver externally funded research projects and commercial contracts in the current circumstances.
14. Officials from DAERA, AFBI, QUB and UU are working up communications about this testing collaboration with a view to an announcement later this week.
15. This is an evolving scenario and we will keep you informed as it develops.

RECOMMENDATION

16. That you note this update on Covid-19 testing at AFBI.

Name:	Name Redacted
Branch:	AFBI sponsor Branch
Contact:	Irrelevant & Sensitive

ATTACHMENTS

None

CC List

Denis McMahon

Brian Doherty

Names Redacted

Sean McGrade

Robert Huey

Name Redacted

Alistair Carson

Name Redacted