

REPORT FROM THE CHAIR OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND FOOD ADVISORY COMMITTEE

NIFAC Meetings

NIFAC meeting 18th February

1. NIFAC met in open session at the FSA NI offices, Belfast on 18th February. Among other business, members received an update from Rosemary Hignett, FSA Strategy Division, explaining the Agency's EU and International Strategy and from Claire Boville on Front of Pack (FOP) labelling issues.
2. The Committee also heard presentations from Stephen Humphreys, FSA Head of External Affairs, explaining the Agency's approach to Consumer Engagement and Susanne Boyd, FSANI, explaining how advice given by the Committee following the Science themed meeting at Queen's University on 24th June 2009 has been reflected in the Agency's approach. The advice from those discussions is as follows:

Consumer Engagement

- The fact that Agency is putting consumers first and trying to get effective consumer engagement is welcomed.
- There is a need to test for political conflict in organisations that purport to represent consumers but who may have their own particular agendas which they are trying to push, independently of any consumer consensus.
- Understanding of the consumer experience can be expensive to develop and any, already extant, social and marketing data that can be exploited should be utilised where possible. This is not just for existing issues but as an indicator of upcoming issues.
- The Committee will watch with interest for any developments which might be occurring with ACCE.
- It will remain important for the Agency to take account of any regional differences, particularly with issues such as GM where different policies exist across the UK and also across the island of Ireland. It would be good to have robust evidence based processes that inform the FSA of whether or not to do regional consumer engagement on any issue.
- When considering the consumer views on the use of new technologies the FSA should remember that there may be existing technologies which can fulfil a useful role and are currently underused. Pasteurisation provides a precedent

for a technology which was not embraced in the first instance and has since become widespread. A mechanism should be found to ensure that best use is made of those technologies that do exist and which could enhance consumer safety.

- Some members reflected that if good stakeholder engagement was possible on an area as technically opaque and complex as meat hygiene charging, then any subject was possible. The papers and minutes produced from this Committee's discussions may be instructive in this regard.

The Food Standards Agency's Response to NIFAC Science Advice

- NIFAC is pleased that the Agency is taking this work forward and is delighted that the science capacity exists in the NI office to address these issues.
- Subsequent advice has resulted in a revised line from the Department of Health that there is no evidence of a link between MAP and Crohn's disease. This can be found in the Q&A related to the Johne's survey on the Defra website.
- Encouraging to see the extension of good work with regards to traceability. This is good for all consumers and industry in NI.
- Low numbers of people coming forward to give blood for vitamin D testing will likely remain an issue in pursuing the Vitamin D deficiency mapping.
- It is clear that none of the subjects addressed at the June meeting or the concerns emerging were NI specific. All are being taken forward in some way either through existing FSA programmes, or by other partner organisations.
- Given the emerging and changing nature of scientific evidence and food safety concerns, it was agreed that some of these subjects should be re-visited on a periodic basis in order to maintain contact with the scientific stakeholder in NI and to support the FSA horizon scanning programme.

Meetings with Others

3. The Chairman has met with a number of stakeholders during the period and for the first time will be attending the main Northern Ireland party conferences with another board member. For details please see the Board Member Engagements paper number SO 10/03/04.