

REPORT FROM THE CHAIR OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND FOOD ADVISORY COMMITTEE

Executive Summary

1. The attached report provides an update on issues emanating from the Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee.
2. The Board is invited to **note** the report by the Chair of the Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee. **No action** is required.

Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland

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NIFAC Meetings

1. The Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee last met on 18 January 2006 at the FSANI offices in Belfast, and addressed agenda items as follows.

Review of NIFAC Retreat (closed session)

2. Members discussed the NIFAC Working Guide, which reflects the outcomes of the Committee's retreat in November 2005. The document which summarises the purpose, protocols, priorities and partnerships for NIFAC, is an internal and dynamic tool, which will be useful for gauging the Committee's progression. NIFAC appreciates the greater engagement of the SWaNI Advisory Committee views prior to Board discussions, and the attention now being brought to bear on mechanisms for feedback.

FSA Generic Presentation (closed session)

3. NIFAC members are keen to support the FSA in raising awareness of what FSA does in Northern Ireland to protect consumers' interests relating to food. They have offered to use, under agreed protocols, the recommended FSA generic presentation with their networks. Sarah Stanczyk, Head of Communications FSANI facilitated a useful discussion about the presentation, and ideas for the further enhancement of it.

Update on the FSA Foodborne Disease Strategy and the '4C's Campaign'

4. Kathryn Baker, General Food Hygiene Unit FSANI gave an overview of the Agency's Foodborne Disease Strategy, looking in particular at the '4C's campaign in Northern Ireland'. The Committee agreed the following points and members:

- applauded the achievements of the 4C's campaign and the progress of the foodborne disease strategy as a whole;
- welcomed the co-operation and shared approach between FSA-I, FSANI and with FSPB. The joint FSANI - FSPB activity at the Balmoral Show was also endorsed;
- welcomed the implementation of their previous advice on HACCP tools and food safety management in the catering sector;
- encouraged the development (in distribution and scope) of existing hygiene literature such as the 'Big Functions Big Responsibilities' leaflet for a wider audience including Country and Farmers Markets;
- members encouraged the Agency to monitor initiatives where possible, especially to see if FSA initiatives can be linked to positive changes in the communicable disease and foodborne zoonoses reports.

The Governance of Science

5. The Committee is grateful to Dr David Atkins, Strategy and Regulation Division, who briefed the Committee in closed session and facilitated in the open discussion. Members agreed the following:
 - The Agency could make greater use of ad hoc groups of experts to tackle specific issues rather than rely solely on the expertise of existing advisory committees.
 - The Agency must continue to ensure that where there is scientific uncertainty this is made clear in presentation of risk assessment and risk management options to the Board. This is especially so when emergency demands a precautionary but rapid response. A process for provision of additional evidence should also be outlined.
 - The Agency should emphasise the cycle of the science governance processes. Specifically there must be a commitment to gathering evidence on the effectiveness of policy (actions, advice, and behaviour change). This would help to demonstrate the Agency's commitment to review and continuous improvement.
 - The Agency should take account of possible Regional needs for specific scientific evidence and risk management options. These should not be overlooked in the overarching UK wide science and research priorities defined by the Strategic Plan.

- The Agency should not overlook the importance of engagement with stakeholders, particularly social scientists, at the earliest part of the science governance process when the questions are being framed for the risk assessment.
- The Agency should ensure that science governance builds in active stakeholder challenge throughout the risk analysis journey. Particular emphasis should be given to the challenge of international expert opinion at the risk assessment stage.
- The Agency should ensure that there is a challenge process that alerts us to the implications of new scientific tools and developing technologies for use in risk assessment or risk management.
- NIFAC welcomes the expanded role for the Chairs of the Scientific Advisory committees in providing assurance to the Board on the use of their committees' advice in support of risk management proposals.
- The Agency must set out clearly that in making risk management judgements, the Board takes account of **all** evidence not only the risk assessment advice from the scientific advisory committees.
- Members encouraged the Agency to maintain current internal scientific literacy in all relevant disciplines.

Consultation on a Voluntary front of pack Signpost Labelling Scheme

6. Maria Jennings, Head of Consumer Choice FSANI presented an overview of the voluntary front of pack signpost labelling scheme, which is currently out to consultation. The Committee discussed the consultation proposals and agreed the following:

- A slight majority of Members agreed that the Coloured Guideline Daily Amount (CGDA) system is more suitable than the Multiple Traffic Light (MTL) system because:
 - it provided the simple colour code (high/medium/low) while providing additional information about what constitutes a healthy diet;
 - it is impossible to have a diet of only 'green' items and so consumers will have to do comparisons. CGDA allows 92% of consumers to get that right;
 - it avoids triplicate labelling (EU requirements, CGDA on back and MTL on front); and

- would thereby encourage greater uptake of the scheme thus assisting more consumers.
- Members agreed with the banding criteria, but asked that it be consistent with other 'banding' used by FSA so as to avoid consumer confusion.
- Members suggested that if the scheme is a success, the Agency could consider tailoring the GDA for children where appropriate.
- If the Agency favours the MLT system over the CGDA, then the Committee felt that back of pack GDA information could be beneficial.
- Members recognised the challenges faced by manufacturers (especially in the island of Ireland with a border to another Member State) if multiple labelling systems were introduced, and urged the Agency to lobby in favour of an EU nutrition information requirement similar to the FSA's, thereby avoiding multiple forms of nutritional labelling.
- The Committee would like to see maximum uptake of the new system and so all manufacturers should be encouraged to use the scheme for all food categories, rather than the specific few outlined at the present time.
- Members agreed that the sugar criteria should be based on total sugars.
- Members asked the Agency to consider issues of visibility: colour blindness and font size etc.

Recruitment

7. The process for the appointment of 5 new members to take up office on 1 August 2006 is now well underway. Interviews took place on 10 January 2006, and the panel's recommendations have been submitted to the Minister.

Meetings with Others

8. Once again FSA NI had the opportunity to present a joint award, with FSAI, to the best student graduating from the e-learning Masters in European Food Regulatory Affairs. This is a North-South initiative between 3 universities on the island of Ireland and students from 12 Member States participate.

Future NIFAC Meetings

9. The programme and provisional agenda for future meetings of the Committee is described below.

DATE	EVENT	POTENTIAL TOPICS
22 February 2006	Open meeting, FSANI offices, Belfast	TOPICS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Folic Acid• OTM• Openness
29 March 2006	Open meeting, FSANI offices, Belfast	TOPICS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Fit Futures• Sustainable Development• FSANI Outreach Strategy• Primary Production Update
17 May 2006	Open meeting, FSANI offices, Belfast	TOPICS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Eating for Health theme activities• Cooking Bus