

**REPORT FROM THE CHAIR OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND FOOD ADVISORY
COMMITTEE**

Executive Summary

1. The attached report provides an update on issues and includes advice 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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REPORT FROM THE CHAIR OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND FOOD ADVISORY COMMITTEE

NIFAC Meetings

1. NIFAC last met on 6 September at the FSANI offices, Belfast. An overview of the Committee's recommendations follows:

Nanotechnology

2. The Committee was grateful to fellow member Professor Jack Pearce for his overview on nanotechnology, describing what it is, its current applications, how it can potentially be used in the food sector, and what concerns there are about its usage. The Committee provided the following comments and advice:
 - The Agency would benefit from consulting with experts in the field to explore what the impact of nanotechnology on consumers might be 20 or 30 years into the future in order to set a relevant regulatory framework now.
 - The FSA should be proactive in communication, toxicological investigation and in understanding how this technology can be used to provide additional consumer protection. The Committee was not convinced that existing regulatory frameworks would be adequate.
 - Since existing approved materials (additives, nutrients, ingredients, materials in contact with food etc) may behave differently in nanoform, consultation with relevant scientific committees should be started now so that adequate risk – benefit scenarios can be developed and communicated. E.g. some materials may be more toxic, whereas some nutrients may be more bioavailable etc.
 - Sustainability must be featured into the risk benefit analysis. An understanding of retention and disposal properties needs to be made.
 - Alternative routes of entry/exposure of nano particles to the human body from foodstuffs will also have to be factored into the risk assessment.
 - Any policy decision taken by the FSA must be clearly communicated to consumers in terms of these risks and benefits. It is hoped that the consumer protection benefits of nanotechnology will not be lost because of tardy or inaccurate debate.

- Methods of analysis for nanoparticles in or in contact with food must be developed early and proactively. Methods that are costly and highly specific would impact on enforcement.
- The Agency should reference regulatory practices across Europe and other parts of the world when formulating policy.
- Should nanotechnology be adopted by the food industry, the FSA should recognise the impact across other aspects of policy. E.g. if nanolabs or nanosensors indicate shelf stability certain labelling practices may not be necessary.
- It was recognised that the cost issues associated with nanotechnology are unknown at the present time.

Strategic Plan 2005/2010: Progress Review

3. The Committee was grateful to Neil Roden, Head of FSA Strategy and Planning Unit for updating members on the review of the Agency's current strategic plan. The Committee considered the targets considered in the review, and offered the following preliminary comments and advice:
 - The Committee continues to request the '5-a-day' fruit and vegetable healthy eating target be considered as a high priority.
 - The Agency is encouraged to be more proactive when target setting for the longer term, finding ways to better anticipate what food buying, preparation and consumption will be in the future and establish regulatory frameworks and policies suitable for that.
 - A mechanism needs to be put in place for adding new targets / priorities into the plan since the external environment can change very quickly. A rolling plan is probably necessary.
 - The Agency's fundamental delivery mechanisms should not dominate in the Strategic Plan, but rather be reflected in a different planning document which links everyone's contributions and objectives.
 - The costs referred to in target 33 are exceptionally high in Northern Ireland due to the Euro Freeze case. The way in which food fraud investigations or major incidents are funded should be examined and revised.
 - The terminology used in the Plan should be tightened, so that targets show a clearer indicator of what is expected from the Agency and other partner organisations.

- Targets for partnership working should be developed since most of the Agency's success depends on such relationships.
- Caution was advised when considering the Agency's targets regarding eating for health. This needs to be looked at strategically, with the recognition that it is a lifestyle and not just a food issue. The role of the FSA and the role of consumers will need to be considered. An individual target does not serve consumer or Agency.
- Assurance schemes have not been supported or encouraged by the Agency. When reviewing target 29, consideration should be given to a new approach so that appropriate assurance schemes can be used to help the Agency in achieving its goals of greater consumer protection.
- The Agency should place a higher priority on sustainability targets.
- The Committee welcomed the review, and look forward to a further discussion in November when a more substantial discussion can take place.

Update on Foodborne Disease Strategy

4. Members were grateful to Lucy Foster, FSA Microbiological Safety Division, who updated the Committee on the Agency's work on the reduction of foodborne disease across the UK. The Committee offered the following observations and advice:
 - A better understanding of which interventions are effective against which organisms would be useful as would a clearer understanding of the epidemiology of some of the organisms. It was however realised that many interventions have a cross-cutting effect on incidence of disease.
 - The Committee reminded FSA of previous concerns expressed relating to the transmission of the verocytotoxin gene to other strains of E coli than merely O157. The strategy should take account of this.
 - Foodborne viruses should be included in the strategy.
 - The review of listeria by ACMSF is welcomed given the current upward trend of this disease. The severity merits intensive efforts.
 - Adequate resources and funding for the provision of HACCP in NI are essential so that Northern Ireland consumers receive the same level of protection as those in England.
 - The Agency is encouraged to horizon scan for new methods to further reduce foodborne disease. The three main pillars of intervention have brought results

but a major step change could be achieved with new approaches and may not be achieved without them.

- Members recognised that the success of the foodborne disease strategy relies heavily on partnership working between the Agency, the food industry, local authorities, DARD (the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development) etc. These partners are to be congratulated for their major contributions. The success so far augurs well for other areas of FSA work.
- A request was made for incidence data to be presented on a population basis so that better comparisons could be made between countries of the UK.

Implementation of the EU Food Hygiene Legislation On Farm

5. The Committee was grateful to Kirsten Dunbar, Head of FSANI Primary Production unit for her presentation on the background relating to and the current situation on the implementation of the EU Food Hygiene Regulations on farm across the UK. The Committee offered the following comments and advice:

- Guidance material is needed for primary producers as well as enforcers regarding the new legislation. Industry stakeholders as well as DARD should be involved in advising on this material. Multi-media approaches will be required.
- Farm assurance schemes should be assessed as appropriate and included in the risk assessments that inform inspection regimes.
- Careful management is needed in the collection of anecdotal non-compliance data due to the competitive nature of the industry and enforcement community.
- The enforcement of the legislation should be outcome rather than process based.
- Since DARD has a dual function of industry support and enforcement of this legislation, the FSA audit and monitoring of the scheme will be important for consumer confidence.
- The agency could use market organisations in receipt of primary produce as part of the communications platform. For example, promotion at abattoirs and at markets may be useful in promoting the legislation to a wider audience.

Consumer Engagement

6. Members were grateful to Jaz Bangar, FSANI Communications Division, who delivered a presentation by video conference on how the Agency is developing its consumer engagement work. In conclusion:
 - The Committee congratulated the Agency in presenting the Board with a challenging model and for the creative initiatives used to develop it.
 - The Committee endorsed the social research committee as part of quality control for consumer engagement.
 - The use of modern communication technology to capture consumer views and conduct research was encouraged
 - Advisory Committee engagement in initiatives was requested by HQ and NIFAC are willing to help wherever we can add value.
 - The issue-specific method of engaging with consumers was welcomed and endorsed. It may also be necessary to weight some evidence depending on the issue under debate.
 - The provision of training for the Executive and opportunities for all to be engaged in consumer engagement was welcomed, but care needs to be taken to ensure information collated by numerous individuals is not merely anecdotal.
 - Peer to peer dialogue and promotion within the community was also recognised as being very important to successful consumer engagement.
 - There is an additional challenge. How do we engage consumers in catapulting ourselves forward to 2025 so as to build relevant policy now?

European Commission Discussion Document on Setting Minimum and Maximum Levels for Vitamins and Minerals in Foodstuffs

7. The Committee was grateful to Clair Baynton and Trudy Netherwood, who were present by video conference. They gave an overview of the above consultation, and an update of the recent discussions with stakeholders. The Agency's draft response to the consultation questions was considered, with advice being voiced as follows on the nine points of the FSA response.
 - The Committee agreed with the Agency's response.

- The Agency's response was strongly supported. It should be made clear that despite divergent views, the FSA has clearly stated its view that limits are necessary.
- A cap should be set albeit with inadequate data to date. Research should be commissioned on a Pan European level and the cap then needs to be reviewed regularly should the market change or with the progression of research. A mechanism should be put in place to monitor this across the Member States. Industry should be required to provide market data to support the review.
- The Committee agreed with the Agency's response.
- Good models must be used when assessing the potential range of intakes at the EU level. The similar (though less complex) work completed with regard to additives could be referenced for this.
- The Committee agreed with the Agency's response.
- Maximum levels set must take into account the needs of people who have the lowest requirements for vitamins and minerals, and the converse applies for minimum levels.
- Where possible there should be consistency with the claims and PARNUTS legislation. However, the desire for consistency should not compromise either consumer safety or increase the risk of consumers being misled about minimum levels.

Additional Points

- The Agency should take account of the unstable nature of some of these materials. Higher levels are added at point of manufacture to ensure adequate amounts at point of sale or end of shelf life
- Adequate methods of analysis that give equivalent outcomes are necessary to enforce the internal market in the supplements and fortified foods.

Meetings with Others

8. The Chair has met with a number of stakeholders during the period. For details please see the Board Member Engagements paper number SO 06/09/04.

Future NIFAC Meetings

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

Date	Event	Potential Topics
25 October	Open meeting, Enniskillen	TOPICS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Meat Hygiene Enforcement in Northern Ireland• Communicable Disease Control in NI
26 October	Committee Retreat, Enniskillen	
29 November	Open meeting, Agri-food and Bio Sciences Institute (AFBI), Belfast	TOPICS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• OTM• The work of the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI) in Consumer Protection• Sustainability• The work of the FSPB• The Strategic Plan Review 2005/2010