

REPORT FROM THE CHAIR OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND FOOD ADVISORY COMMITTEE

NIFAC Meetings

1. NIFAC last met on 25 and 26 October at the Manor House Hotel, Co Fermanagh for businesses meetings (25) and Committee Retreat (26). A summary of the events and advice follow:

Business Meetings: 25 October 2006

The Implications of Devolution on the FSA in Northern Ireland (closed session)

2. The Committee was grateful to fellow Member Tony McCusker, who gave an overview of the implications of devolution on the FSA in Northern Ireland. Due to timing restrictions, it was agreed that this topic would be revisited in future. The Committee and FSA should consider the following issues for further discussion:
 - The strengths associated with the Agency's status as a non-Ministerial Government Department, and the Agency's resulting independence from political agendas will need to be clearly established and maintained.
 - The importance of the Island of Ireland being a separate epidemiological entity from GB especially in relation to animal and plant health/disease and the enforcement challenges from a very porous/non existent border;
 - Emergency planning in its broadest sense, e.g. the importance of planning for a Chernobyl style incident, animal health and zoonotic diseases will need to be considered across the British Isles;
 - How will the governance of food issues on the Island of Ireland be sorted between the various players – FSAI, FSA, FSA NI, FSPB?
 - What risks and potential opportunities does the NSMC present to FSA?
 - How can devolution provide greater opportunity to take forward the obesity agenda through forums such as the All-Island Food and Nutrition Forum?

Assuming an Agreement is reached at St Andrews:

- How do we influence the new programme of government?
- What are the mechanisms for ensuring the FSA in Northern Ireland presents appropriate food issues for consideration in that programme?

Stakeholder Engagement (closed session)

3. The Committee was grateful to fellow member Sinéad Furey and FSANI Acting Assistant Director Roberta Ferson, who gave a joint overview of stakeholder engagement in NI. The Committee will revisit this topic in 2007. The following was agreed:
 - Consultations issued: The Agency in Northern Ireland should consider only holding face to face public consultations on key cross-cutting issues, and convening cross-sector stakeholder meetings to discuss these issues.
 - Stakeholder meetings: The FSANI should question how valuable the current format of stakeholder meetings is especially if stakeholder groups already meet to discuss some of the specific issues. The bi-annual meetings may not be necessary. Issues identified with the current format are as follows:
 - Enforcement: Bodies like the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH) hold discussions at which the FSANI are present. More use could be made of these to engage with the enforcement community.
 - Industry: Small businesses do not have the capacity to attend such meetings, and larger businesses are able to influence issues at a higher level (UK, EU etc). Thought should be given to other methods, such as the model used by DARD to engage their stakeholders (panels).
 - Consumer: The lack of interest shows that this format does not work. The recent Board decisions may result in greater flexibility of approach. The consumer panel option could also be considered.
 - NIFAC meetings: Attracting stakeholders is not essential given the nature of the meetings. However, when meetings take place out of Belfast, they should be easily accessible to the public. Where appropriate NIFAC could host a stakeholder forum on a specific topic.

A Review of the Incidence and Trends of Various Foodborne Illnesses in Northern Ireland

4. The Committee was grateful to Audrey McQuaid, information manager at the Communicable Disease Surveillance Centre (CDSC) (NI) for her overview of the current state of knowledge regarding the surveillance of foodborne illness in Northern Ireland. The Committee agreed that the Agency's Foodborne Disease Strategy contributes positively to the reduction of foodborne illnesses in Northern Ireland, and noted that the availability of this evidence is important to the Agency's policy decisions. The emphasis must now be on the reduction of *Campylobacter*, following the successful reduction of *Salmonella*.

Meat Hygiene Enforcement in Northern Ireland

5. The Committee was grateful to Robert Huey, Senior Principal Veterinary Officer, Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) for his brief on consumer protection challenges and opportunities in the delivery of meat hygiene enforcement in Northern Ireland. The Committee offered the following observations and advice:
- The Committee has benefited from hearing about the work of Veterinary Services, and is encouraged by the good coverage provided in terms of consumer protection on a routine basis.
 - The difficulties in tackling organised crime were recognised. This is not helped by the porous land border with the Republic of Ireland and the political situation in Northern Ireland. However, this concern is somewhat appeased by some confidence in the reasonably joined-up service in Northern Ireland and the ongoing process of rationalisation.
 - As noted in previous discussions, the FSA is not a market support organisation. DARD's decisions on charging the industry for their services must therefore be considered by the relevant organisations, such as Defra/DARD/DETI etc. The Committee was conscious that any charges presented to the industry would ultimately impact on the consumer.
 - As the Agency encouraged the MHS to adopt a more risk-based approach, DARD were encouraged to do likewise. Similarly both DARD and MHS should allow the FBO to carry their own responsibility for safe food.
 - There is a need for officials involved the implementation and delivery of policy in Northern Ireland to be included in policy development in UK.
 - The principles of the MHS governance and accountability structures must be applied to DARD (albeit in different ways) to ensure robust independence and adequate consumer protection.

Strategic Plan Theme: Food Safety

6. The Committee was grateful to FSANI Deputy Director Gerry McCurdy for his presentation on the implementation of the strategic plan theme of food safety in Northern Ireland. NIFAC has already addressed Foodborne Disease, HACCP and the 4Cs at earlier meetings, and therefore did not consider these issues in the discussion. The following was agreed:
- The Committee welcomed the update, and expressed an interest in learning more about the food safety systems database.

- The Agency's initiatives on the education of the primary production sector were welcomed, as it will help decrease the perception that food is merely a commodity.
- The Agency was encouraged to engage with leadership groups within ethnic communities to help food business operators to run their businesses in line with food hygiene legislation and food practice.
- The Agency was applauded on its partnership approach with the Environment and Heritage Service and other bodies regarding sampling regimes, ensuring the best use of resources and avoiding duplication.
- Members encouraged the targeted use of stakeholders for horizon-scanning purposes.
- The additional research into the detection of viruses in shellfish was welcomed, so that the use of *E.coli* as a surrogate indicator for viruses would no longer be necessary.

Committee Retreat: 26 October 2006

7. The Committee was grateful to Alison Farrell of Insight 2 U, who facilitated the Retreat in 2005 and now in 2006. Gratitude was also recorded to the FSA's Deputy Chair Julia Unwin, who was present at the Retreat and gave an overview of the Board's perspective on how the devolved Committees add value to the Agency. The Committee will discuss the report of the Retreat at the next meeting on 29 November and share our learning with colleagues in WFAC and SFAC.

Meetings with Others

8. The Chairman has met with a number of stakeholders during the period. For details please see the Board Member Engagements paper number SO 06/12/04.

Future NIFAC Meetings

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

| Date | Event | Potential Topics |
|------------------|--|--|
| 29 November 2006 | Open meeting, Agri-food and Bio Sciences Institute (AFBI), Belfast | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The consumer protection work of AFBI • The work of <i>Safefood</i> • Official Food and Feed Controls – the National Control Plan • The Review of the Strategic Plan |

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| 17 January 2007 | Open meeting, FSANI offices, Belfast | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Visit from the Chief Medical Officer • Sustainability • EU Labelling – A new approach • Folic Acid |
| 28 February 2007 | Open meeting, FSANI offices, Belfast | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Conclusions of the Review of the Framework Agreement and the FSA's Audit Scheme • Consumer Engagement • The work of the HPA • OTM |