

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. NIFAC met on 29 November 2006 at the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute (AFBI), Belfast, and again on 17 January 2007 at the FSANI offices, Belfast. A summary of the advice from the two meetings follows:

Meeting on 29 November 2006

2. This meeting was hosted by Dr George McIlroy, Chief Executive of AFBI in their new Board room at their headquarters in Belfast. Members were also given a guided tour of the premises, which included visits to the pressure treatment facility, the category 3 laboratory and the algal testing team. The Committee found the presentation and visits to be a valuable insight to the work of AFBI, helping members to better understand how the Agency and AFBI can work together to enhance consumer protection in food.

The National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS) Rolling Programme: Progress Report (closed)

3. The Committee was grateful to Mark Bush and Gillian Swan, FSA Consumer Choice and Dietary Health Division, and Maria Jennings, Head of FSANI Consumer Choice and Food Standards for the progress report on NDNS. The following observations and advice were noted:
 - The Committee welcomed the progress on the NDNS, and supported the fact that the survey is a rolling programme rather than a one-off study. Northern Ireland's inclusion in the survey for the first time was welcomed.
 - Members welcomed the sample boost for Northern Ireland but were concerned about the small size of the core NI sample, given that NI had been excluded from the survey in the past.
 - The Agency was encouraged to explore ways of increasing Northern Ireland funding for the project so that the sample boost could be maintained for as many years as possible (since we have no historic data to provide trend information).
 - The long-term, broad brush approach of the survey was applauded but the Committee advised the FSA to ensure that the correct ethical permissions and samples were established at the outset to allow genotyping data to be collected.

- The Agency should ensure ethical permission is granted in all parts of the UK – this may differ.
- The mechanism for read across over the island of Ireland was welcomed, as a larger sample population will afford a greater depth of analysis.
- The Committee looks forward to being able to determine the effectiveness of FSA policy as the results of the surveys emerge.

The Work of 'Safefood', the Food Safety Promotion Board (FSPB)

4. The Committee was grateful to Martin Higgins, Chief Executive of FSPB for his update to NIFAC on the priorities and linkages FSPB has with FSANI, especially in light of the changing political landscape in Northern Ireland. This topic would form the basis of a later discussion on the role of All-Island bodies on the island of Ireland, and the Committee gave the following advice and observations:
 - The Agency welcomes *Safefood's* co-operation with the National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS), and hopes that there will be comparable data for the ROI and NI. It will be important to ensure that data collected is accessible to all stakeholders.
 - Members were notified that the summaries of the all-island consumer focussed reviews are available online but copies will be made available to the NIFAC members.
 - Consideration should be given to the format and purpose of the all-island food and nutrition forum. There is significant work to be done.
 - A conference will take place during the first week in May 2007 between FSAI, FSANI and *Safefood*. The theme will be around evidence for policy intervention on nutrition.
 - The teachers' information initiative was welcomed. This is a programme aimed at encouraging teachers to work in laboratories in order for them to project science in an interesting light to pupils.
 - The Committee welcomed the economic analysis available to inform healthy eating and food safety policy.

Official Food and Feed Controls: the National Control Plan (NCP)

5. The Committee was grateful to Catriona Stewart, FSA Food Hygiene Implementation Division and Kirsten Dunbar, Head of FSANI Primary Production for their overview of the NCP. Members offered the following advice and observations:

- The Agency's responsibility for official food and feed controls is recognised throughout the document even where other bodies deliver services. The FSA is thus clearly identified as being accountable for ensuring the various services are effective.
- Mechanisms have been built into the Plan to ensure regular updates (including websites) are made.
- It is imperative that the interfaces between the Agency, the Republic of Ireland and other Member States are well managed and this should be brought to the attention of the Commission.
- Catriona was congratulated on an excellent and important piece of work, and the Committee looks forward to its publication.

The Strategic Plan 2005/2010: Progress Review

6. Members were grateful to Neil Roden, Head of FSA Strategy and Planning Unit for returning to the Committee and detailing the progress of the Strategic Plan Review. Comments on the Review were noted as follows:

Food Safety

- A number of incidents have arisen outside the UK with ramifications for across the UK. A mechanism for working with overseas industries, and industry chains within the UK to address these issues would be welcomed.
- The new target number 11 in the Strategic Plan 'Working with the food industry and other stakeholders to improve mechanisms for preventing and responding to incidents by mid 2008' can be used as an objective for continuous improvement.

Eating for Health

- There is now a sustainable development action plan for Northern Ireland, which includes healthy eating. These initiatives should be linked in the plan.
- More focussed work on portion sizes would be welcomed as part of the energy balance work of the FSA
- Areas where the Agency can add expertise to the nutrition agenda as a regulator are:
 - provision of scientific evidence to inform other partners e.g. health and education

- working with manufacturers to stimulate reformulation
- providing information to consumers, for example front of pack labelling
- encouraging others to intervene where there are particularly vulnerable groups e.g. promotion of foods to children.

Choice

- The allergen management strategy should be retained in Food Safety section or at a minimum referenced in the Food Safety section of the Strategic Plan given the serious food safety risk to those affected.

Meeting on 17 January 2007

A Review of All-Island Bodies (closed)

7. The Committee was grateful to FSANI Director Morris McAllister for his overview of the roles, responsibilities and relationships between the FSA and the Food Safety Promotion Board (FSPB). Based on FSA commitment to put the consumer first and in terms of efficiency of public bodies, the Committee recognised that:

- Although the field is crowded, no options for change should be ruled out. The Agency should encourage and initiate an open minded tri-partite review to look the relations and functions of the three bodies. The review should:
 - Revisit governance issues which are key to ensuring all functions are executed in the most efficient manner;
 - Include an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of FSPB;
 - Clarify the roles of each body in all their areas of responsibility;
 - Explore the best methods of policy evaluation and delivery, especially where the policy is not made by the bodies in question.
 - Look at other bodies which operate on an All-Island basis, such as the Fisheries Board, for examples of good practice
- The review should be used to examine how to modify (strengthen or reduce) the roles of the FSPB for the benefit of consumers in the island if Ireland.
- The FSA NI should initiate a meeting of the Chairs and Directors as soon as possible to initiate such a review.

Foodborne and Waterborne Bioterrorism (closed)

8. The Committee was grateful to fellow member John Moore, who briefed the Committee on the threats of foodborne and waterborne bioterrorism. The following was advice and observations were recorded:

- It is reassuring to learn of the existing systems operating across the UK, the EU and the RoI. These should be reviewed regularly to ensure they remain 'fit for purpose'.
- The Agency must maintain its awareness of threats without generating a sense of panic among consumers.
- The FSA should consider how to factor malicious acts by an employee to a company into HACCP plans.
- Laboratories must exercise strict security and bio-security measures to prevent the abuse of hazardous materials in their care.
- Good traceability systems in companies are essential for the management within the organisation and to the control bodies having to co-ordinate crisis management action nationally.

The Food-related work of the Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS)

9. The Committee was grateful to Dr Michael McBride, Chief Medical Officer with the DHSSPS for his overview of the work of DHSSPS which interfaces with the food safety and nutritional work of the Agency. The following comments were noted in discussion:

- Obesity in children is an international issue. Fit Futures identifies these issues and reflects the major changes in lifestyle in recent years. Although limited trend data is available, obesity appears to be rising at a rate of around 1% per year.
- It is necessary for the government to address poverty issues in order to effectively tackle rising obesity in Northern Ireland. Departments involved in the anti-poverty strategy (such as the Department for Social Development (DSD) and the Office for the First Minister and Deputy First Minister (OFMDFM)) should be involved in the Fit Futures implementation targets. The Review of Public Administration (RPA) and devolution give the government a good opportunity to examine and alter arrangements for health and obesity.

- A combined approach to food and health is needed, and DHSSPS could avail of the Agency's social science evidence base.
- Astute performance management with outcome based measures is essential to the success of Fit Futures. Processes for the prevention of obesity as well as the cure should be measurable and shown to be effective.
- Research necessary to underpin the initiatives in nutrition, healthy eating of food safety will not all be carried out by DHSSPS. A range of institutions will do the research which will be funded and supported by DHSSPS. The co-funding by DHSSPS of the first Northern Ireland NDNS is especially welcomed.
- It is clear that the science base of the FSA is being used to underpin some of the initiatives underway in catering establishments, schools, and the school food programme.
- DHSSPS and FSANI should continue to work together to ensure that co-ordination and communications takes place at an appropriate level to ensure effective programmes for consumers.

Folic Acid

10. The Committee was grateful to Alison Tedstone, FSA Consumer Choice and Dietary Health Division for her presentation on the current FSA consultation on folic acid fortification. The following was agreed:

- There is an overwhelming view that action of some sort must be taken on the issue.
- The Committee would encourage the Agency to explore alternative options of boosting folate. Pilot programmes should be developed and evaluated. For example, the proactive prescription of supplements to non-pregnant women (if possible), delivery of chewing gum in school classes and the longer term option of genetic genotyping.
- The majority of members were in favour of immediate mandatory fortification of most standard breads (with the exception of speciality breads) with folic acid. This, however, should not militate against consumer choice and must not disaggregate on income.
- A minority recommended that the Agency increase the effort to encourage young women to take folic acid supplements and change their diet to increase the consumption of folate rich foods. This was due to the concern over the unknown side effects of folic acid for the majority of the population.

- Members agreed that if the Agency decides to fortify foods with folic acid, voluntary fortification should be modified and closely monitored.

The EU Labelling Review

11. The Committee was grateful to Tony Flower, FSA Consumer Choice and Dietary Health Division for his overview of the EU Labelling Review, and notes on the Board's labelling workshop that took place on 5 December 2006. The Committee agreed the following:

Principles

- Members were comfortable with the principles of safety, product identification and integrity, and nutrition to govern a requirement for the mandatory provision of information. The principle of majority interest as a requirement must be agreed on a pan-European level, and must be evidence based so as to not interfere unnecessarily in the European single market.

Foods sold loose

- The same principles applied to foods sold loose.
- Information related to the principles of safety and product identification and integrity should be made available at the point of sale in a way that is practical and enforceable.
- As much nutritional information as is practicable should be made available at point of sale though it may be necessary to apply 'average' rules.
- Members agreed that the statement above on principles also applies to foods sold loose providing:
 - there is the recognition that average principles must be applied, particularly in relation to measurements;
 - there is consistency in the traceability requirements of 'labelling' between pre-packed foods and foods sold loose;
- These same recommendations should be considered in relation to the catering sector.

Research

- Research is needed to find out how people use labels – e.g. how often consumers use them, what information they use, how and when they use that information, and the clarity and uptake of information on the label.

- Work should be done on a pan-European basis to inform the EU strategy on labelling. Consumers should be included in the protocols for this work.

Other

- Local Authorities should be encouraged to deal with labelling issues much more robustly, ensuring that a well-enforced minimalist approach is taken.

The Agency's Proposals for a new Independent Science Committee

12. The Committee discussed a letter from Dr Wadge which outlined the Agency's proposals for a new independent science committee. Members:

- Approved of the proposed committee's functions.
- Did not believe the composition and governance arrangements as outlined were fit for purpose because of the predominant influence and membership of the Chairs of the Advisory Committees. NIFAC suggested the following:
 - the presence of senior scientists from Europe and the industry sector be added so as to counterbalance the presence of SAC Chairs on the committee;
 - lay representatives on the committee will need to receive adequate support, and have a strong understanding of consumer interests;
 - an ethical dimension should be included in the committee.
- Felt that the Agency must examine the ways in which added value is given to the horizon scanning since the Advisory Committees will already do some of this within their own expert areas.
- Agreed that the Advisory Committee on Research (ACR) should be abolished.

13. The Members also discussed the Chief Scientist's blog on the Agency website. Everyone agreed that it was appropriate for the FSA to have a science blog. However the majority of members questioned the appropriateness of the Chief Scientist himself hosting it. It may create a separate communications channel to the Agency and could inadvertently cut across policy lines and positions. While everyone recognises and admires the unique skill sets of the CSO only one member felt that the Chief Scientist was the right person to run the blog.

NIFAC Recruitment

14. Unfortunately, two NIFAC Members resigned in November 2006. Alan Crowe due to ill health, and Sinéad Furey after being appointed as a Nutritional Associate with the Department of Education. An appointments process is underway, the interviews having taken place on Wednesday 31 January. The submission will now be submitted to the Minister.

Meetings with Others

15. The Chair has met with a number of stakeholders during the period. For details please see the Board Member Engagements paper number SO 07/02/04.

Future NIFAC meetings

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

Date	Event	Potential Topics
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• Initiatives to Improve Food in School in Northern Ireland• Update from the FSANI Communications Unit
4 April 2007	Open meeting, FSANI offices, Belfast	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Overview on Food Policy and Enforcement Challenges facing the UK (John Harwood)• Consumer Engagement• The Impact of the Better Regulation Initiatives on the FSA• Recommendations on New Models for Meat Enforcement