

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

**Executive Summary**

1. The attached report 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 for Northern Ireland. **No action** is required.

**Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland**

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### NIFAC Meetings

1. NIFAC met on 28 February 2007 at the FSANI offices, Belfast. A summary of the advice from the meeting follows:

#### *Persistent Chemicals in Food (closed session)*

2. The Committee was grateful to fellow member Alex McGarel for her overview of 2 surveys looking at the incidence of man-made industrial chemicals in human blood serum, and their occurrence in every day foods from across Europe. Their presence in foods can be inadvertent and at very low levels, and although not toxic *per se* they are not inert and their bioaccumulation and persistence following cessation of use may be a cause of concern. The following observations and advice were noted:
  - The Committee on Toxicology (COT) should (if not already in place) widen assessments to include the effects of long term exposure to low doses of chemicals, an awareness of different methods of exposure alongside current evidence on the effects of dosage.
  - Research on the effects of persistent chemicals should consider the 'cocktail effect'. Probabilistic modelling (including chemical groupings, methods of exposure and understanding of mechanisms of toxicity) could be used to prioritise and target groups of materials that may have the same mechanism of effect.
  - In assessing the risks of these chemicals and their inadvertent presence in foods, the FSA needs to consider the risks and benefits of use.
  - There needs to be a philosophical debate to look at the benefits as well as the risks of exposure to persistent chemicals. It was clarified that it is not the FSA's responsibility to initiate the debate, but the Agency should not lose sight of it.
  - The Agency should seek to ensure that messages on healthy eating do not have unintended consequences of increasing exposure to industrial chemicals in food – whether in choice of food or food preparation method.
  - The Agency was encouraged to continue surveillance and monitoring of presence and toxicological effects of persistent industrial chemicals in food.

- The Committee favoured a global approach to minimising persistent chemicals, but realised that different national priorities render this difficult if not impossible.
- In reviewing the safety of nano-particles for use in food and food contact materials, the FSA and associated Scientific Advisory Committees should consider as far as possible the inadvertent and longer term implications of persistent biologically active materials and bioaccumulation of the same.
- The Agency should work in partnership with all relevant organisations involved in the control of industrial chemicals to increase awareness of the inadvertent risks to food and water.

*Update on the Student Survival Guide (closed session)*

3. The Committee was grateful to Andrea Marnoch, FSANI Consumer Choice and Food Standards Division, who presented an overview of the FSANI's student survival guide 'Fresher Food'. The following advice and observations were recorded:
  - Social sciences expertise should be sought on the questions used in the evaluation of the guide in order to distinguish between students' awareness, understanding and behaviour.
  - The evaluation should include an economic analysis of food choice if possible.
  - The completed evaluation will lead to a number of initiatives that were welcomed. The Committee suggested the following post-evaluation initiatives:
    - Messages to increase intakes of calcium and iron should be aimed at males as well as females.
    - All school leavers should be targeted, not just university students.
    - QUB should be approached again to co-fund the initiative, and the distribution of the guide should be widened to include FEE and University students across the island of Ireland.
    - The incorporation of nutrition messages and practical cooking skills in schools as part of the Fit Futures programme is welcomed. However the targeted work for school leavers is above and beyond what is in the normal curriculum.
    - An increase in web-based formats for the guide for easier access by parents and more cost effective access by schools and other tertiary sectors.

- The Agency should explore more carefully the concerns of international students about the price and quality of food in the UK.
- Partnership working with organisations such as DHSSPS, FSPB and local industry is key to progressing the distribution of the guide. The content is owned and copyrighted by FSA and all of these organisations should be encouraged to partner in distribution.

#### *The New Vision for Food Law Enforcement*

4. The Committee was grateful to Julie Monk, Head of FSA Enforcement Division for her presentation on the proposed new approach to food law enforcement; and to Michael Jackson who provided clarification on Northern Ireland issues. The Committee welcomed the Agency's work, and offered the following advice and observations:
  - The move to a risk based, proportionate, outcome based system was welcomed,
  - NIFAC welcomes the research being undertaken to determine the best interventions for different situations. The NI LA contribution on the effectiveness of alternative strategies will be available mid 2007 and should be helpful in building the evidence base. Significant research is still necessary to underpin the best outcome measures for compliance. The Food Premises Survey is a useful baseline but may need to be supplemented with other measures.
  - There was a desire to see the consistent application of standards across the UK – all administrations must be adequately trained and resourced for the new approach.
  - Animal feed was also considered as an important part of the food chain and should be considered as a priority area. It was suggested that Defra might be able to promote its importance when associated with animal health.
  - It is clear that audit systems must track the new approach to enforcement. Tick box returns will no longer be valid and outcome audit measures will be required. The inter-authority audit pilot programme in NI will provide useful results for intra authority audit per se but will need to feature in the new audit requirements when ready.
  - There was a desire to see Northern Ireland LA's involved in the full consultation process. Given the changes to RPA and the radical reduction in number of LA's in NI, the Agency should ensure that local politicians are aware of the necessity to resource food safety enforcement.

## *FSA and the Better Regulation Agenda*

5. The Committee was grateful to Philip Clarke, FSA Better Regulation and Consultation Branch for his overview of the GB position on the better regulation initiatives; and also to Trevor Mitchell of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment (DETI) for his advice on Northern Ireland issues. The same principles of Better Regulation apply in NI which essentially parallels the UK schemes with the exception of determining the cost of administrative burdens. The following was agreed:

- The Committee welcomed simplification of regulation as well as a reduction in administrative burdens as a means of improving compliance. It is in the interest of industry as well as consumers.
- The simplification of regulation was applauded and the Agency was encouraged to continue with this – encouraging it also in development of EU legislation.
- The consistent approach to the revision and reduction of FSA ‘forms’ and paper work was also welcomed. NIFAC were pleased with assurances that any reduction of administrative burden introduced by FSA would be carried through to delivery partners such as the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and Local Authorities in the NI application of policy and enforcement.
- Concern was expressed about the interfaces between the UK and the Northern Ireland schemes. FSANI – being a Non Ministerial devolved NI Government Department must comply with better regulation and simplification procedures in both jurisdictions and be active to avoid any gaps, contradictions or duplication especially with delivery partners.
- Philip Clarke invited NIFAC members to bring to his attention any awareness of food related regulations in NI needing simplification or where reduction of administrative burdens would be beneficial. Mr Clarke also informed all present that FSA is encouraging an industry sector to volunteer for scrutiny with a view to regulatory simplification.
- The new FSA risk based, proportionate, outcome focused approach to enforcement should of itself result in reduction of regulatory and administrative burdens for LAs and food business operators.
- Parallel changes in penalty regimes should be implemented across the UK and not be confined to GB. While recognising that penalties are a last resort, they are an important sanction for persistent and fraudulent offenders.

## *FSANI Communications Update: December 2005 – January 2007*

6. The Committee was grateful to Sarah Stanczyk, FSANI Senior Communications Officer for her overview of the activities of the Communications Unit since December 2005. The following comments advice were noted:
  - The Committee welcomed the good work that has been done with limited resource and encouraged ever more effective, appropriate and creative partnerships with different organisations (public and private) in order to maximise the results of FSANI projects.
  - Members asked for more information about the Consumer Attitudes Survey, and this will feature in a future meeting.
  - The Committee encouraged the Agency to continue promoting good news stories where possible.
  - Issues associated with stakeholder engagement (in particular the People's Panel) will be addressed at the April meeting of NIFAC.

### **Corrigendum**

7. For logistical reasons, previous advice was submitted to the Board in advance of the Minutes being ratified. Discussion at the meeting resulted in a correction to Board Paper 07/02/06 item no 7, bullet point 1, indent 2 should now read: 'Include an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses associated with the interfaces of the three organisations'.

### **NIFAC Members**

8. This meeting was the last for Committee Member Dr Sinéad Furey, who resigned after being appointed as a Nutritional Associate with the Department of Education. Members took the opportunity to wish her well for the future. This was the first meeting for new Members, Dr David McCleery and Mr Alan Bingham.

### **Meetings with Others**

9. The Chairman has met with a number of stakeholders during the period. For details please see the Board Member Engagements paper number SO 07/03/04.

## **Future NIFAC Meetings**

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

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Potential Topics</b>
4 April 2007	Open meeting, FSANI offices, Belfast	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Food policy and enforcement challenges facing the UK</li><li>• Consumer Engagement Model</li><li>• The FSANI Food Standards Manual</li><li>• Initiatives to Improve Food in Schools in Northern Ireland (Department of Education lead)</li></ul>
23 May 2007	Open meeting, Belfast City Hospital	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Talk from Dame Deirdre Hutton</li><li>• Challenges Facing the Food Supply Services within a Hospital</li><li>• Update from the FSANI General Food Hygiene Unit</li><li>• How Health Promotion can be delivered in Northern Ireland in the future</li></ul>