

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 Advisory Committee for Northern Ireland. **No action** is required.

Food Standards Agency Northern Ireland

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NIFAC Meetings

1. NIFAC met on 4 April 2007 at the FSANI offices, Belfast. A summary of the advice from the meeting follows:

Stakeholder Engagement (closed)

2. The Committee was grateful to Roberta Ferson, FSANI Corporate Resources for her update of the ongoing review of stakeholder engagement. Members discussed a range of issues relating to the review, advising and commenting on how the Agency could carry forward the mapping work completed to date. A small subgroup has been formed to support the Executive in this work.

New Governance Arrangements for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) (closed)

3. The Committee was grateful to FSANI Deputy Director Gerry McCurdy for his overview of proposals for new governance arrangements for DARD and the work completed to date. The Committee considered issues relating to the areas below and advised as appropriate.
 - DARD's purpose and responsibilities in relation to the FSA ;
 - The current arrangements in place;
 - The risks to the Agency, the legal position and constraints;
 - Current work on the governance of DARD services to FSANI;
 - The overarching Review Committee and the need for independent membership;
 - The importance of partnership working.

Food Policy and Enforcement Challenges Facing the UK

4. The Committee was grateful to the Agency's Chief Executive, John Harwood, who gave his thoughts on the main challenges facing the UK regarding food policy and enforcement. The Committee offered the following observations and advice:
 - The Agency's commitment to increased partnership working was welcomed, as this will serve to build on North/South relations on the island of Ireland. The Review of Public Administration (RPA) in Northern Ireland will also require effective partnership working especially to ensure no further slippage in the science work done by LA's.

- Consumer protection is the Agency's priority, and not to be a market support organisation. However, the Better Regulation programme in FSA will help deal with some of the administrative burdens that are perceived to be barriers in an all island agri-food industry which is of particular importance to the economy of Northern Ireland.
- The Committee supports interactive working with the Food Safety Promotion Board (FSPB).
- Mechanisms do need to be found to deal with the socio-economic issues associated with the legacy of 'the Troubles'. This is especially important in the relation to food poverty work.
- The increased political scrutiny from the new Ministers and Committees will bring new pressures and FSANI will need to gear up to cope with this new work.

The Agency's Consumer Engagement Model

5. The Committee was grateful to Jaz Bangar, FSA Consumer Branch for her overview of the Agency's new Consumer Engagement Model. The following observations and advice were recorded:
 - The Committee welcomed the Agency's ongoing work on consumer engagement.
 - The citizen's forums were welcomed, with Members recognising that the qualitative data will help inform the Agency's quantitative research. The following was agreed specifically concerning the forums:
 - The plan to refresh the committees annually was welcomed and recognised as important in preventing panel conditioning.
 - Disadvantaged stakeholder groups in Northern Ireland that have been developed as a result of 'the Troubles' may find these forums particularly useful, the issue of food being an excellent neutral subject to debate. This could be a mutual benefit for the FSA and the group.
 - It is necessary to consider a wide spectrum of views before policy decisions are made.
 - The Committee was content with the terms of reference and composition of the Advisory Committee for Consumer Engagement (ACCE), and encouraged the Agency to ensure that the Committee's audit function accounts for the range and quality of engagement and to ensure that the consumer engagement model is fit for purpose.

- The work to increase the profile of consumer engagement internally was applauded, and the 'Putting the Consumer First' guide will be important in engaging with stakeholders who have a high interest but low influence in Agency business.

The FSANI Work in relation to Food Standards Enforcement

6. The Committee was grateful to Mervyn Briggs, FSANI Consumer Choice and Food Standards unit for his overview of the promotion of food standards enforcement work in District Councils by the FSA. The following comments and advice were noted:

- The Committee welcomed the emphasis given to food standards by the Agency.
- The Agency's work in raising awareness on food standards must be consistent across the whole of the UK.
- The Agency should continue to ensure that food issues are considered a priority especially as the Review of Public Administration (RPA) proceeds.
- Members welcomed the creation of the Food Standards Training Manual, which should be reality-checked by way of peer review (including industry). The manual will be a useful tool, and the FSA should promote its effective use across the UK.
- The dual approach of enforcing and training was applauded.
- Partnership with the Food Safety Promotion Board (FSPB) on allergen training and on the UK Food Surveillance System (UKFSS) was welcomed as an efficient use of resources.

Initiatives to Improve Food in Schools in Northern Ireland

7. The Committee was grateful to Brian Hill, Head of Schools Administration in the Department of Education, for his overview on the current position regarding the introduction of new nutritional standards for school meals and other food in schools. Members were also grateful to Maria Jennings, Head of FSANI Consumer Choice and Food Standards Division for updating the Committee on the Agency's work in relation to food in schools. The following observations and advice were recorded:

- The success of Fit Futures is dependent on a cross-departmental approach, and the Fit Futures implementation group would benefit from representation from Departments that have responsibility for the anti-poverty and social inclusion strategies.

- There is a need to implement changes in the schools with special emphasis on targeting poor nutrition and food practices in lower socio-economic groups. Targeting social need is a key element of the programme and the FSA team was asked to bring this to the attention of the Fit Futures implementation group.
- The Committee recognised that improving nutrition in schools is a long term project and aims to affect a life-long positive change, and the vast amount of positive work on nutritional standards for school meals, healthy vending, packed lunches, curriculum development etc that had already been completed was applauded.
- Schools should consider better communication to parents regarding the allocation of school dinner funds.
- Existing networks addressing poverty issues in Northern Ireland should be engaged as a way of combining anti-poverty and food/nutrition initiatives.

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 07/05/04.

Future NIFAC meetings

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

Date	Event	Potential Topics
23 May 2007	Open meeting, Belfast City Hospital	TOPICS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • New Opportunities in Northern Ireland • The Challenges Facing the Food Supply Services Within a Hospital • The Activities of the FSANI General Food Hygiene Unit • The Draft Saturated Fat and Energy Intake Programme
27 June 2007	Open meeting, FSANI offices	TOPICS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recommendations on New Models for Meat Enforcement • The Consumer Attitudes Survey • The BSE Implementation Review Group