

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Update from Director of Regulatory Compliance, People and Northern Ireland to NIFAC 31st October 2023

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Executive Summary

Attached is the FSA in Northern Ireland Director's update to the Committee for October 2023.

- No action by members is necessary. Contact: Michael Sewell: Michael.sewell@food.gov.uk

Evidence Generator

Children's Meals Sampling Project

Survey data was used to get an overview of children's meals sold in restaurants in Northern Ireland. Using this information, sampling was carried out by the eleven local councils of the 4 most popular children's meals. The nutritional data from the sampling has been collated and analysed and combined with the information from the survey data to produce a NI specific report outlining the findings. The report will be published. This work will create, for the first time, a comprehensive data base of information on children's meals in restaurants in Northern Ireland. The report will support future work in this sector, including policy decision, guidance or interventions.

Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) / Committee on Toxicity (COT) Working Group Meeting on Plant-Based Drinks

Given the increasing availability and consumption of plant-based drinks in the UK, a Joint SACN/COT Working Group has been established to conduct a benefit: risk analysis considering both nutritional and toxicological aspects associated with consumption of plant-based drinks (focussed on soya, oat and almond drinks). FSA NI are a government observer on the group and will filter any recommendations through to relevant policy colleagues across Northern Ireland e.g. Department of Health (DoH), public health dietitians etc.

Ultra Processed Foods

In July 2023, the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) issued a position statement on processed food that concluded that although the observed associations between higher consumption of ultra processed foods and adverse health outcomes are concerning, many evidential limitations exist. Therefore, the committee noted there

is currently insufficient evidence for SACN to carry out a full risk assessment on the topic of processed foods and health and that it will be revisited at the SACN summer horizon scanning meeting in 2024.

Policy Maker

Making Food Better Programme

We have recently launched the Making Food Better Programme (previously known as the Eating Well Choosing Better Programme) which aims to support Northern Ireland food businesses to make the food environment healthier through reducing calories, saturated fat, sugar, and salt in the food they produce, sell or serve, reducing portion size, providing nutritional information and delivering responsible promotions.

The programme underpins all the workstreams across the manufacturing, out of home and retail sector. To clarify what we mean by 'better' we have created an acronym highlighting how the programme links into all of our work streams:

- **Balanced** – providing nutritionally balanced options
- **Environment** – promoting a healthier and more sustainable food environment
- **Transparent** – providing consumers with more information about the food they eat
- **Trusted** – high quality food, that is what it says it is
- **Education** – educating consumers about a healthy balanced diet and providing data and insights about food product improvement
- **Reformulation** – food product improvement to make food that is healthier.

The programme is supported by frequent stakeholder engagement including a bi-annual Making Food Better Steering Group meeting (with reps from the retail, manufacturing and out of home sectors, the Food and Drink Federation (FDF) and government departments) and a bi-annual Knowledge Provider meeting (with reps from local colleges, universities and Invest NI). Both meetings took place in October.

To ensure the workstreams under the Making Food Better programme are relevant and aligned with current policy direction, we regularly engage with other government departments and public sector agencies across the UK and Ireland on nutrition policy and research, with recent meetings taking place with OHID, Food Standards Scotland and Safefood.

Nutritional Standards and Sustainability Guidance for Vending in Local Councils

We have been working with representatives from the eleven local councils to draft nutritional standards and sustainability guidance for vending in local council settings.

This is the first phase of a wider workstream on developing nutritional standards for catering, vending and procurement.

Planning continues for an event on 'healthier and more sustainable vending' which will be held on the 12th March 2024 in La Mon hotel. The aim of the event is to support vending businesses and government stakeholders in Northern Ireland to comply with the vending nutritional standards by highlighting good practice and exhibiting products that meet the standards. The event will be run by the FSA in conjunction with the Department of Health, DAERA and Invest NI. The Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE) have also been asked to support and attend the event.

Food Standards Delivery Model (FSDM)

Ahead of the implementation of the new Food Standards Delivery Model in Northern Ireland, the FSA is finalizing and seeking agreement on rollout dates from each Management Information System (MIS) provider. FSANI colleagues are also working with colleagues in England and Wales to develop training resources for local authorities/district councils such as an e-learning module, SMARTS video clips and live online training sessions.

Regulator

Blue Green Algae – Non- Routine Incident Update

The incident remains as a non-routine serious incident with weekly planned Incident Management Co-ordination Group (IMCG) meetings. All fish samples have now been sent to The Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS) for analysis (who are also forwarding to a lab in USA for part of the analysis). This was completed in two tranches with samples submitted last week and this week. Risk assessment colleagues are researching available information, so they are ready to consider the results when they are received. IMCG is working up a handling plan that includes an analysis of stakeholders who we need to engage with, a comms handling plan and a sequenced timeline of events.

CBD

Following the availability of new data, the FSA has published updated CBD consumer advice advising healthy adults not to consume more than 10mg of CBD per day. This replaces previous advice issued in February 2020 which recommended healthy adults not to consume more than 70mg of CBD per day. Whilst CBD foodstuffs are unauthorised novel foods in Northern Ireland, they are still available on the NI market.

Therefore, Northern Ireland consumers will be signposted to the updated FSA consumer advice. There is currently no EU consumer advice on consuming CBD foodstuffs.

Following district council surveillance of CBD products on the NI market, a smarter comms letter was sent to reminding English local authorities of the CBD position in NI and asking them to remind businesses in their area of the position. The letter noted that district councils may also reach out to the relevant local authorities directly regarding the legal status of CBD in NI.

Watchdog

Consumer Messaging

Over the summer FSA and FSS published new advice to reduce the risk of Listeriosis to higher risk consumers from ready-to-eat cold-smoked and cured fish. We are advising pregnant women and those with a weakened immune system to avoid eating ready-to-eat cold-smoked or cured fish. As the risk of serious illness from listeriosis increases with age, the FSA and FSS are also advising that older people should be aware of the risks. We have also now shared a supporting toolkit to stakeholders to communicate this message. The toolkit consists of FSA Explains Listeria video, social media content and supporting assets.

We are also issuing advice to consumers, food business operators and district councils as high levels of *Listeria monocytogenes* are being detected in enoki mushrooms imported into the UK. Recent analysis of survey results carried out at point of entry to the United Kingdom and at retail between 2022-2023, by the FSA and local authority partners, found that *Listeria* was detected in enoki mushrooms, sometimes at very high levels. Following the initial risk assessment

conclusion, the FSA and FSS are issuing new advice to consumers with regards to enoki mushrooms, that there is a risk of illness from listeriosis if food hygiene standards are not practiced. The advice will raise awareness of the risks associated with the handling and consumption of enoki mushrooms; offer consumers the most up to date advice, based on our latest risk assessment, so they can make informed choices; highlight the need to cook enoki mushrooms and for them not to be consumed as ready to eat products; ensure that enforcement authorities and Food Business Operators are aware of labelling statutory requirements, and of the need for cooking instructions to be included.

Convenor and Collaborator

All Island Food Poverty Network event

The FSA and safefood co-hosted this year's All-Island Food Poverty Network event in Dublin on 26th September. The event focussed on learning from the lived experiences of food poverty. Barnardo's and the Trussel Trust presented data on the cost of living crisis and food insecurity, as well as quotes from individuals experiencing food insecurity. Other presentations explored co-creation projects within communities, including an example of a community supermarket in Ards and North Down. The event was well attended in person and online and a recording will be available in the coming weeks.

Calorie Wise Award

The Western Health and Social Care Trust successfully retained the gold Calorie Wise award for displaying calories on the menus in their restaurants and coffee shops. Catering managers from the Trust were congratulated by Cllr Thomas O'Reilly, Chair of Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, at an event to mark their achievement. The event was attended by representatives from the Trust, and Fermanagh and Omagh Environmental Health Department.

Honorary lecturer for Queen's University of Belfast

Dr Aoibheann Dunne in our Science and Surveillance team has been awarded the title of Honorary Lecturer at Queens University Belfast from the Faculty of Medicine, Health & Life Sciences.

Windsor Framework Preparedness

FSA preparations for the operational commencement of new arrangements under the Windsor Framework from 1 October have been focussed on ensuring that our delivery partners, district councils (DCs), are suitably trained and empowered to support the availability of GB standard retail food products on the Northern Ireland market.

We worked closely with Defra to deliver a package of legislation to implement the Windsor Framework and ensure Northern Ireland consumers benefit from the same level of robust public health protection as the rest of the UK. EU food safety and standards rules have been disapplied for pre-packed retail goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland via the Northern Ireland Retail Movement Scheme. The new legislation extends GB food safety, marketing and organics standards to NI, allowing goods moved via the scheme to meet GB standards.

In addition to this we have delivered a comprehensive programme of training and guidance for DCs. The guidance explains the operational requirements of the Windsor Framework, the respective roles of competent authorities, and responsibilities in enforcing GB standards on the NI market. E-learning courses were made available for DCs and other interested governmental stakeholders. In-person sessions were also

offered across Northern Ireland, which were developed to support officers delivering both GB and EU food safety controls inland and at points of entry. The training was developed in conjunction with The Chartered Institute of Environmental Health (CIEH). Positive feedback has been received on the products delivered, and the e-learning has been made available to local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales.

Staff Charity of the Year

Each year the NI staff team vote for a charity to support through various fundraising activities. This year we are partnering with AWARE NI, which focuses on mental health and specifically supporting people through depression and bipolar disorder. We are co-ordinating a number of fun fundraising events, such as a Christmas abseil down the Europa Hotel, and a healthy soup lunch to start us off for the year. Other fund-raising favourites will be events and activities around the Christmas and Easter periods, and we find this a valuable way to build staff cohesion.

Andy Cole

Director for Northern Ireland