

Report from the Chair of the Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee

FSA 23-12-13 This paper updates on the activity of the Committee from the period December 2022 to November 2023.

1. Summary

1.1 This report from the Chair of the Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) reports on the activity of the Committee from the period December 2022 to November 2023.

1.2 The Board is asked to **note** the activities of NIFAC and **comment** on the current forward look plans.

2. Introduction

2.1 The role of NIFAC is defined in the Food Standards Act 1999 and acts as an advisory body to the Food Standards Agency (FSA). It is chaired by the Board Member for Northern Ireland and its role is to advise the FSA on food safety and standards issues, with particular emphasis on Northern Ireland.

2.2 NIFAC Members provide a wide range of expertise, experience and practical knowledge to the FSA. All Members are recruited through open public appointment competition and are appointed by the Minister for Health in Northern Ireland.

2.3 The Committee works closely with the FSA both in Northern Ireland and beyond and supports the FSA's strategic outcomes.

2.4 This paper highlights the themes that have been considered and discussed by NIFAC over the last year as well as looking forward to the work of the Committee in the next 12 months.

3. Committee Membership

3.1 The Committee has a complement of eight Members, one of whom is also the FSA Board Member for Northern Ireland and NIFAC Chair. Until August, NIFAC was also joined by the FSA's Boardroom Apprentice for 2022 – 2023, Judith Harvey.

3.2 There is a wide range of expertise among the NIFAC Membership, including Members with backgrounds in farming and agriculture; education; communications; industry; research and policy; and environmental health. This wide-ranging experience as well as Members' associated networks and insights has been extremely useful for NIFAC discussions.

3.3 One Member finished their second term of appointment on 31 July 2023, and another will finish their second term on 16 February 2024. Three Committee Members will finish their first term on 31 March 2024, two of which are expected to seek reappointment. To ensure NIFAC continues to operate with an appropriate Membership, a public appointments exercise is

underway, with interviews schedule to take place in January 2024.

3.4 In the absence of the Northern Ireland Executive, the appointments process was approved by the Permanent Secretary at the Department of Health. Recommendations for appointments will be made to the Minister of Health in due course. In the event that there is no Minister for Health in the absence of the Northern Ireland Executive, the appointment recommendation will be made to the Permanent Secretary at the Department of Health.

3.5 The Committee wishes to put on record its thanks to the retiring Members for the considerable contributions, insight and experience they brought to discussions.

4. Committee Meetings

4.1 Over the course of 2023, three NIFAC themed meetings have taken place in person. Each theme, guided by the Chair, has provided the Committee with the opportunity to consider issues from a country specific perspective, enabling discussion and consideration of a number of relevant themes and matters.

4.2 NIFAC meeting themes were raised and agreed by Committee Members in closed session following the January 2023 NIFAC themed meeting.

4.3 Over the last year, the Committee has considered the following themes:

- **Food Standards Delivery Model.** The Committee heard from FSA officials who lead the new Food Standards Delivery Model Work in Northern Ireland. NIFAC also received presentations from FSA officials in the Regulatory Compliance Division, who covered the new delivery model in greater detail. Paula O'Neil from Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council delivered a presentation that provided insights on the 15-month pilot of the new delivery model.
- **Feed.** The meeting was held at Fane Valley Feeds Ltd site in Omagh. The Committee received a presentation from FSA officials that outlined the FSA's role and position in relation to feed policy. NIFAC then heard from the Chief Executive of the Northern Ireland Grain Trade Association (NIGTA) who presented on their trade awareness course, challenges in the supply chain, quality assurance schemes and sustainability/environmental issues. This was followed by a presentation from Food Fortress. The Project and Sustainability Director of Fane Valley Feeds delivered an overview of their business and operations, followed by a tour of their mill.
- **Food Fraud/Food Crime.** The meeting was held at Queen's University Belfast. The Committee received a presentation from the FSA Food Fraud Liaison Officer which outlined the FSA's role in relation to food fraud/food crime. NIFAC then received a presentation from officials from the Institute for Global Food Security which described their approach to increasing food security, including a focus on food integrity, sustainability, and economic issues. The presentation was followed by a tour of their facilities.

4.4 NIFAC also met in person to consider papers ahead of each Board meeting. These Board preparation meetings have allowed Members to consider the published Board papers and provide a devolved perspective, enabling the Chair to feedback Committee comments during Board meetings.

4.5 Board preparation meeting have been used as opportunities to deliver on the Committee's commitment to greater visibility and stakeholder engagement. The June meeting was held in Enniskillen after which NIFAC visited the farm of the Ulster Farmers' Union President. The Committee heard about the challenges faced to farmers in Northern Ireland particularly in relation to EU exit and Covid-19. Before the December meeting the Committee will visit St Louise's Comprehensive College, a comprehensive school in Belfast. The aim of the visit is to create a

snapshot of the school's provision of healthy and sustainable food typical of school children across Northern Ireland.

5. Review of the Food Advisory Committees (FACs)

5.1 The Board Members for Northern Ireland and Wales are undertaking an informal review of the FACs to ensure that they are operating in the most efficient and effective way, and they are best placed to provide country specific advice now that the UK is outside the EU. The Northern Ireland Board Member presented an update paper to the June Board meeting.

5.2 The paper included recommendations to improve the effectiveness of FAC meetings and the use of FAC Members' time. The FSA Chair hoped that the recommendations would strengthen the Board's understanding of local issues in Northern Ireland and Wales.

5.3 The recommendations set out in the Review of the FACs Board paper are being implemented by the NIFAC and WFAC secretariats. Work is underway to make best use of NIFAC Members' time, as seen through the extended meeting format. In addition, NIFAC advice expressed during Committee meetings has been shared with the Board through the weekly Board updates coordinated by Private Office, in order to increase their awareness of regional views.

6. Forward Look

6.1 The Committee is currently developing a forward work programme for 2024. In line with the Review of the FACs, meeting themes in 2024 will be coordinated with the Welsh Food Advisory Committee (WFAC) to provide greater consistency across the FACs. Areas which the FACs are planning to consider over the coming year include Regulated Products; Public Procurement; and the Local Authority Landscape.

6.2 NIFAC Board preparation meetings will continue to focus on papers being discussed by the Board, with particular attention to areas of special relevance to Northern Ireland.

6.3 The Committee will also consider any priorities set by a new Northern Ireland Executive, including a Programme for Government, and where appropriate, consider any themes relevant to the FSA in Northern Ireland.

6.4 The Committee will continue its commitment to stakeholder engagement and raising the visibility of NIFAC, holding meetings and visits across Northern Ireland.

7. Conclusions

7.1 NIFAC has considered a wide variety of themes over the last 12 months and has appreciated the input from colleagues both within the FSA and those externally.

7.2 The Committee will take 2024 as an opportunity to continue to engage with stakeholders in Northern Ireland and deliver the recommendations set out in the Review of the FACs.

7.3 The Board is asked to **note** the activities of NIFAC and **comment** on the current forward look plans.