

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Directors' Report April 2024

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1. Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides a summary of activities relevant to the FSA remit in Northern Ireland since the last report from the Director of UK and International Affairs and Director for Northern Ireland to the Committee in January 2024.

2. Chief Executive's Report to the Board

2.1 The latest Chief Executive Report that was presented to the March Board meeting can be found [here](#).

3. Overview from the Director of UK and International Affairs (UKIA)

3.1 This section provides an overview of some of the key work undertaken by the Director of UKIA, Anjali Juneja, that will be of interest to NIFAC since the last report in January.

3.2 A lot of my time has been spent on the impact of the recent Home Office announcement on migrant worker salaries. Teams across the organisation have been working to develop and deliver a sustainable approach to recruitment and retention of our highly skilled Official Veterinarians (OVs) and Meat Hygiene Inspectors (MHIs) workforce. Our OVs and MHIs play a crucial part in abattoirs in protecting food safety and animal health and welfare for our society, as well as underpinning trade for the £9.1 billion domestic meat industry and £20 billion agri-food export markets. We are now assessing the recently received details of the Home Office's proposed policy changes to salary thresholds for skilled worker visas which are likely to have significant impact on the UK's ability to recruit and retain OVs and MHIs in these vital roles. We are working with Chief Veterinary Officers, Government officials across the UK and the Veterinary Professions to consider next steps.

3.3 The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) is leading on preparations for Port Health Authorities, port and industry readiness for the introduction of the changes in April with support from the FSA. As members will be aware, ports on the west coast handling traffic from the island of Ireland will commence physical checks on non-qualifying Northern Ireland goods at a later date. A series of live operational testing events are taking place, following live shipments through the import process as though the controls to be introduced at the end of April were in place. These exercises will be a practical test of the new and existing systems, processes and infrastructure in place in readiness for the new control measures and will include documentary, identity and physical checks, as well as sampling of loads. This testing is being coordinated by the Cabinet Office with Defra and the FSA being closely involved alongside importers, large retailers and Port Health Authorities.

3.4 Defra and the FSA are also working closely with GB local authorities and Port Health Authorities to ensure they are prepared for new Border Target Operating Model (BTOM) arrangements, including recruitment of staff. Whilst there will inevitably be a period where new staff are trained, and businesses and others adapt to the new controls, we understand that this work is well under way to ensure a smooth implementation. Goods destined for Northern Ireland will need to meet the BTOM requirements when entering GB. These will vary depending on whether a load is in direct transit using the land bridge or will be split once in GB. Defra is engaging with traders in Northern Ireland to provide advice specific to their needs.

3.5 In March I met Tom Reid from the Executive Office to discuss the Democratic Scrutiny process. This was a helpful discussion of potential 'asks' of the FSA from the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee.

3.6 Following on from previous dietary health external engagements, I also attended the Northern Ireland Vending Event on Tuesday 12th March with our Chair, Professor Susan Jebb, who was one of the many speakers.

4. Update from the Director for Northern Ireland

4.1 This section provides an overview from the Director for Northern Ireland, Andy Cole, of some of the key work undertaken by the team in Northern Ireland that will be of interest to NIFAC since the last report in January.

4.2 **Northern Ireland Science Festival** – We brought our food safety and healthy eating messages to the Northern Ireland Science Festival on 23rd and 24th February. We delivered key food safety in the home and dietary health messaging to school children and families. Our Science and Surveillance and Communications teams led activities with interactive material for all ages and handed out over 600 resource packs containing nutrition and food safety resources. The event was a valuable opportunity to engage with people of all ages – from schoolchildren and teachers to parents and grandparents – exploring the benefits of a healthy diet, the impact of nutrients on our health and the importance of good food safety in the home.??

4.3 **Discover Belfast** – We were part of the annual 'Discover Belfast' cross government exhibition on 4th March. The event was an opportunity for the various Departments with a footprint in Belfast to find out more about each other. The team showcased the FSA to approximately 1,200 civil servants. Our stand was particularly popular with colleagues highly engaged in discussions about what we do, how we work and what our careers opportunities look like, also referencing areas of mutual interest such as HMRC's fraud departments and the work of the National Food Crime Unit (NFCU).

4.4 **NFCU Engagement** – Members of NFCU came to Belfast on 5th and 6th March to meet with Northern Ireland based NFCU staff and stakeholders. The PSNI and Public Prosecution Service attended along with enforcement leads from district councils and DAERA attended for engagement on the first day. On the second day, members of the Northern Ireland Food Industry Liaison Group met with NFCU to provide extra insights on food crime concerns. During the visit, we also launched the new Food Crime Confidential Hotline.??

4.5 **IFEX** – For the first time in a number of years, we exhibited at IFEX which ran from 5th to 7th March. Our stand was in a prominent location and attracted a steady stream of stakeholders, with good quality engagements on all aspects of our work. Our resource packs provided visitors with material on allergens, Menucal, a food business checklist and healthier catering tips, each with a QR code linking directly to the relevant FSA web page. This was an excellent opportunity to proactively support good business decisions on food safety and standards issues. Stakeholder visitors to our stand included the First and deputy First Ministers.??

4.6 Places for Growth Ministerial Roundtable – As part of our role in Places for Growth we took part in a roundtable event with the Parliamentary Secretary for the Cabinet Office, Alex Burghart MP. The event also featured Ravi Chand, Director of Civil Service People and Places, Mark Bourgeois, Interim Chief Executive of the Government Property Agency and Caroline Hacker, Chief Operating Officer at the Northern Ireland Office. The discussions focused on the key barriers and opportunities associated with relocating roles to Belfast.

4.7 Vending Event – We delivered a showcase event on healthier and more sustainable vending at on 12th March where we also launched the FSA's new [guide](#) to nutritional standards and sustainability in vending. Representatives from local councils, government, private businesses and the vending sector learned about the benefits of implementing the new standards to meet a growing demand for healthier food. The speakers covered good practice in healthier vending across the UK as well as industry perspectives and consumer insights on health and sustainability. The event was opened by the Deputy Chief Medical Officer and a keynote speech was delivered by the FSA Chair, Professor Susan Jebb. Delegates had the opportunity to network with vending service providers and distributors who were exhibiting products that meet current nutritional standards and showcasing sustainability practices.

4.8 Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association (NIFDA) Awards – We recently sponsored the NIFDA Healthier Product Innovation Award. The award was open to any Northern Ireland food and drink manufacturer who had reformulated or developed a new prepacked food product with reduced calories, saturated fat, sugar and/or salt. The award received 13 applications, which was a significant increase from the previous year. The winner of the award was Lakeland Daries, who refined the Comelle Dairy Ice Cream Mix to decrease fat, sugar and calorie content while preserving its traditional flavour. The awards took place on 15th March. The team in Northern Ireland was joined by a number of stakeholders at the table on the evening including the NIFAC Chair, Public Health Agency, College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise and a district council representative.

4.9 What's on the Children's Menu Report – We published the findings of [research](#), conducted in partnership with local councils, into the food on offer to children when eating out in restaurants in Northern Ireland. The research showed that the most popular children's meals were high in calories, saturated fat and salt and that there were few healthy options on children's menus. We also published [Healthier catering tips for children's menus](#) to support businesses improve the nutritional quality of the children's meals they serve. This will be promoted by local councils and the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation.

4.10 Vegan Food and Allergens Campaign – In March, we launched a vegan food and allergens campaign. The campaign aimed to support people with allergies and intolerances to fish, eggs, milk, molluscs and crustaceans, as well as those that care for someone with these allergies. FSA research has highlighted that many people with an allergy or intolerance to products of animal origin believe that the term 'vegan' means it's safe for them to eat. The research also reported that many people weren't aware that there is a risk of cross-contamination in vegan food, as with any food, and that they should check for a precautionary allergen label. It also highlighted a lack of understanding amongst respondents about the difference between the terms 'free-from', 'vegan' and 'plant-based.'

4.11 The campaign included a news story, media coverage, social media content and stakeholder engagement. The campaign was promoted by most district councils who shared videos and social media content to their vast consumer audiences across Northern Ireland. Our efforts were also supported by the Department of Health in Northern Ireland, Consumer Council and Parenting Northern Ireland, strengthening stakeholder relationships, and establishing pathways for future collaboration on allergy campaigns.

4.12 As part of the campaign, the FSA Chair wrote to all MLAs. Following this correspondence, I met with Peter McReynolds, Alliance MLA for East Belfast, to discuss the campaign and other FSA-related issues.

4.13 **Regulated Products Reform** – The FSA is currently progressing with initial reforms of the GB regulated product authorisation process consisting of the removal of renewal requirements for genetically modified organisms, feed additives and smoke flavourings, and the removal of the requirement for legislation (Statutory Instruments) to authorise regulated products in GB. The team has held several engagement events with Northern Ireland stakeholders on reform, including a joint event with the Institute for Food Science and Technology on 25th January. A nine-week, UK-wide consultation on initial reforms was launched on 3rd April.

4.14 **Lough Neagh** – We [published](#) a news story and rapid risk assessment of our test results for toxins in the edible flesh of fish in Lough Neagh, and confirmed that it is safe for people to eat fish from the Lough if it is properly handled. The news story attracted significant media coverage across Northern Ireland across TV and radio news bulletins, and slots on BBC Good Morning Ulster, BBC Evening Extra, and the Nolan Show featuring Robin May, the FSA's Chief Scientific Advisor.

4.15 **Shellfish Annual Classification Review** – Shellfish harvesting areas are classified depending on water quality and determines the treatment required before shellfish may be marketed for human consumption. In collaboration with the FSA Science, Evidence and Research Division (SERD), we review the classification status of all beds on an annual basis taking into consideration results of sampling over previous years. We have completed the annual classification review for the beds in Northern Ireland. There have been no substantial changes to the classifications. The key changes have been to seasonal classification for a number of beds in Belfast Lough that have upgraded to an A/C seasonal classification. ?

4.16 **District Council Training** – The team and MacLaren West delivered a training event to district councils to demonstrate the recent developments made to the UK Food Surveillance System (UKFSS) (a database used by all Northern Ireland district council for logging food samples). The developments include significant improvement in data extraction and report functionality which can be utilised by district councils and the FSA. The training was well received, and attendees provided very positive feedback on the new features of the system.

4.17 **Seafood Industry Webinar** – The team provided the Seafood industry with a Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) update during a sector wide event held with DAERA Fisheries Team in March. The webinar covered DAERA's roll out of a new IT system to facilitate illegal, unreported and unregulated trade movements and an FSA update on the Northern Ireland Retail Movement Scheme, Triangular Trade, and insights from Northern Ireland Port Health Authorities. The webinar was well attended by traders and regulators from either side of the Irish Sea.

4.18 **NFCU/Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) Northern Ireland Prosecution** – In 2021, our Food Fraud Liaison Officer in Northern Ireland shared intelligence with the GLAA regarding an individual who was using persons to gather shellfish commercially in Northern Ireland and supply within the food chain. There were offences under labour exploitation legislation. NFCU financial investigators agreed a joint investigation with the GLAA for proceeds of crime (POCA) and NFCU assisted the GLAA. A confiscation order has now been granted. The suspect pleaded guilty and was sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment suspended for 3 years in Newry Crown Court. The POCA procedure will follow sentencing and will target the defendant's assets.

4.19 **Food Hygiene Rating – Online Consumer Research** – We are working with SERD, the Regulatory Compliance Division and IPSOS to gather consumer behaviours and attitudes to food hygiene ratings in online food settings. This scope includes Northern Ireland and England consumers and will consist of 40 interviews. The work will assist policy development for

mandatory display of food hygiene ratings in online settings and development of the required statutory regulation.?

4.20 EU Notification – We have received confirmation that the Joint Consultative Working Group Secretariat have notified the European Commission regarding the technical changes to update The Bread and Flour Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1998. The Northern Ireland Statutory Rule, which will implement the Bread and Flour review proposals, required EU notification under Regulation (EC) 1925/2006 and Directive (EU) 2015/1535. The notification process was coordinated by the FSA, in conjunction with the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC). Defra coordinated the parallel World Trade Organisation (WTO) notification.

4.21 The changes take into account developments in other food legislation clarifying definitions and providing for the fortification of non-wholemeal wheat flour with folic acid, while also introducing exemptions to avoid disproportionate impacts for businesses. Further changes are providing for the use of improvement notices as a frontline enforcement option and a change to allow flour millers to place unfortified flour on the Northern Ireland market, subject to it being destined for countries outside the UK or used in products destined for countries outside of the UK or used in products destined to be sold outside of the UK. The Bread and Flour Regulations are mirrored across the UK and the timing of this EU notification aligns with Defra's WTO notification.

4.22 EU Breakfast Directives Proposals – EU Breakfast Directives proposals, which aim to help consumers make informed and healthier decisions, have gained political agreement from the European Parliament and Council of the EU. Formal adoption and publication are expected in April 2024. The legislation is expected to come into force in mid-2024, with an 18-month deadline for the requirements to be transposed into national legislation.

4.23 The team is monitoring the EU's progress, alongside both our Legislation team and the EU Team. We have conducted analysis of the proposals in Northern Ireland and will continue to engage with stakeholders, whose feedback will inform any FSA advice.

4.24 UK Regulatory Audit – We hosted and led the quarterly UK-wide Regulatory Audit workshop at the end of March. This is a lively group with representation from all FSA nations, Food Standards Scotland, DAERA, Scottish Government and Welsh Government. Examples of good practice and some challenges were shared, and plans for the incoming year were discussed. This is a useful peer forum for support, information sharing and trouble shooting. The next meeting will be hosted by the England team in the summer.

4.25 Emergency Preparedness – The Communications team took part in two initiatives bringing together a range of civil servants, enforcement bodies, first responders and charities from across Ireland, training and sharing best practice on responding to major incidents using live incident simulations, presentations, and discussion sessions.

5. Consultations

5.1 Current live FSA consultations can be found [here](#).

6. Forward Look

- 22nd – 26th April – Stakeholder engagement events on the consultation on proposed reforms to the regulated products authorisation process
- 15th – 18th May – Balmoral Show
- 16th May – Local Authority Engagement Event
- 12th June – NIFAC Board Preparation meeting
- 25th June – Annual Report Launch in Northern Ireland