

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee Director's Report – January 2024

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NIFAC date 31.01.2024

1. Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides a summary of activities relevant to the FSA remit in Northern Ireland since the last Director's Report to the Committee in October 2023.

1.2 Members are invited to:

- **Note** the update.
- **Invite** the Director to expand on any issues for further discussion.

2. Chief Executive's report to the Board

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

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

3.1 Since the last NIFAC meeting on 31st October, my areas of focus have been on business planning for 2024/2025 which has been an exercise happening across the organisation; plans for implementation of the Border Target Operating Model given the first phase of EU controls will be coming in from the end of January; and supporting the work to reform our regulated products process.??

3.2 On the back of conversations with the Board in the summer about our work on dietary health in Northern Ireland I have been working with the team to review our areas of focus. As part of this consideration of where we can best focus our energies, I met with Judith Hanvey from the Education Authority to discuss the current landscape of schools' policy in Northern Ireland which links to the work we are doing on school meals. I also met with Lauren Bandy from Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Science, University of Oxford, and Laura McGowan from Queen's University Belfast with regards their work in this space. It was great to speak with so many external stakeholders to help understand where we could have the biggest impact. Over the coming months the dietary health team's focus will be on nutritional standards in vending machines and improving the healthiness of children's menus.

3.3 Work on the implementation of the Windsor Framework continues at pace and the wider report covers the work teams are doing to prepare for additional scrutiny requirements and incorporation of certain aspects of our Windsor Framework guidance into the Food Law Code of Practice. I continue to meet with colleagues in Defra to discuss the outstanding policy issues linked to the Windsor framework and in particular the impact of divergence which we continue to closely monitor.

3.4 In January, the UK&IA Directorate came together for an away day in London and I was pleased to see so many colleagues from Northern Ireland there. Amongst other areas of discussion we also picked up UK&IA's people survey results with the senior leadership team.

4. UK&IA Senior Engagement in Northern Ireland

4.1 Meeting with Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) – The Senior Management Teams from both the FSA in Northern Ireland and FSAI met in Dublin in November. We provided organisational updates and discussed recent cross border incidents. The Memorandum of Understanding between the FSA in Northern Ireland and FSAI and associated data sharing agreement was signed.

4.2 Meeting with Safefood – The Northern Ireland Senior Management Team met with Safefood in November as part of our ongoing commitment to understanding priorities within each organisation and identifying appropriate areas for possible collaboration. We were keen to hear more about the Environmental Health Officers (EHO) Forum organised by Safefood for EHOs working both North and South on the island of Ireland. The Forum will be a helpful group to approach to discuss ongoing challenges in both jurisdictions in future, as well as to continue developing relationships within cross border context. Both organisations reflected on the success of the All-island Food Poverty Network annual event which was very well received by attendees.

4.3 New Supply Officer in the Department of Finance (DoF) – The Northern Ireland team met with the new supply officer in DoF in December. We took the opportunity to explain the remit of the FSA and our budgetary challenges and discussed the upcoming return, including bids, for 2024/25.?

4.4 Nitrates/Nitrites – The Northern Ireland team met with the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE) to discuss providing business support regarding the new EU Regulation on Nitrates/Nitrites. The meeting was very useful, with CAFRE eager to work with us on stakeholder engagement. CAFRE noted that the new EU Regulation is likely to have the greatest impact on blend suppliers. They noted consideration also needs to be given to the impact on shelf life on reduced nitrates/nitrites. We will continue to work closely with CAFRE, including on the possibility of holding an industry workshop.

4.5 Heads of Place Belfast – The team in Northern Ireland hosted the December Heads of Place (HoP) meeting on 13th December. Belfast is one of a number of cities/regions with HoPs under the Cabinet Office's Places for Growth programme, designed to oversee the development of Civil Service Communities in each area and promoting opportunities for departments to work collaboratively to achieve more together. As more UK Government Departments develop a footprint in Northern Ireland we are uniquely placed to share our considerable experience of working in a cross-UK setting.

4.6 DAERA Service Level Agreement (SLA) Quarterly and QUAD Meetings – In November the quarterly meeting with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) was held to review progress against the SLA. We also met with colleagues in Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, FSAI and DAERA to consider policy around products of animal

origin. These are routine meetings to share experience of implementing EU Regulations.

4.7 Nutrition Engagement – The Northern Ireland team met with colleagues from the Nutrition Innovation Centre for Food and Health (NICHE) in November. The purpose of the meeting was to discuss joint areas of interest and hear more about the research conducted at NICHE. A follow up meeting is being arranged to discuss potential areas for collaboration.

4.8 A meeting also took place with Nutrition Science colleagues in Food Standards Scotland to share learnings from both organisations' recent purchase of Kantar data which investigates take-home food and drink purchasing. This helped to inform the FSA's future procurement of nutritional surveillance databases as the Science and Surveillance team map their future work.

4.9 Stakeholder Engagement Plan – As part of our ongoing Stakeholder Engagement Plan, the team in Northern Ireland have also held meetings with a number of other key stakeholders since the last report to the Committee, including: the Consumer Council, the Public Health Agency, the Dairy Council for Northern Ireland and the Livestock and Meat Commission. Over the coming months, we are focused on engaging with stakeholders across our remit and will continue to update the Committee on these conversations.

5. Matters of Interest to NIFAC relating to Northern Ireland

5.1 Food and You 2 Northern Ireland Report – The latest report for Waves 5 and 6 of the survey was published in November. Some of the key findings for Northern Ireland from Waves 5 and 6 include:?

- Approximately 92% of respondents reported that they were confident that the food they buy is safe to eat and that 87% were confident that the information on food labels was accurate.?
- Almost one in five respondents (19%) had concerns about the food they eat, with the most common concerns relating to food prices (69%), the quality of food (59%) and food waste (56%).?
- One in four households (26%) in Northern Ireland were classified as food insecure (13% low, 13% very low) and 74% of households were classified as food secure (50% high, 15% marginal).?
- Less than half of respondents (48%) had checked the food hygiene rating of a food business in the last 12 months.?

5.2 Showcase Event on Healthier and More Sustainable Vending – Work is ongoing for an event to be held on healthier and more sustainable vending. The event will be delivered in partnership with the Department of Health, DAERA and Invest NI. It aims to highlight the importance of adopting healthier and more sustainable vending and show how this can be delivered. The FSA, Vending and Automated Retail Association (AVA), Public Health Agency, and Leeds City Council, amongst others, will outline developments in their sectors and provide case studies of positive change.

Local vending operators have been invited to exhibit products that meet current nutritional standards and will offer innovative solutions to providing healthier and more sustainable vending. The event provides an opportunity for public sector and private sector procurement teams who are interested in healthier vending policies to meet with local vendors and discuss business opportunities.

5.3 Wonka Bars – We expected an increase in counterfeit Wonka bars ahead of the new ‘Wonka’ movie released in November. The Incidents and Communications teams issued consumer messaging in advance of this. A Smarter Comms letter to district councils (DCs) was also issued.

5.4 Bubble Tea – There has been an increase in incidents in England related to unauthorised additives, breaches in minimal risk levels for additives and potential choking hazards in Bubble Tea. Northern Ireland has only had one incident to date. Our Food Fraud Liaison Officer raised the issue with the District Council Food Standards and Food Fraud group in December to better understand the sale and supply of Bubble Tea in Northern Ireland.

5.5 Nutramigen Baby Formula – Notification was received informing the FSA that Reckitt, a business based in GB, was undertaking a precautionary recall of two hypoallergenic infant formula powders due to the possible presence of *Cronobacter sakazakii*. There was distribution of affected products to pharmacies in Northern Ireland. The Public Health Agency and Department of Health were notified, who issued an alert to all pharmacies to notify them of the recall.

5.6 Polish Chicken – This is a historic incident dating back to 2020 where Whole Genome Sequencing by UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) identified a number of outbreaks and clusters associated with the consumption of chicken from Poland. As a result, additional measures were adopted by the Polish Authorities which included the testing of all consignments of poultry from Poland for *Salmonella*, this was in place until March 2023. Recently UKHSA has noticed an increase in clusters associated with the same strains and sub strains of *salmonella*.? Incident Management and Co-ordination Group (IMCG) meetings are being held at regular intervals and the FSA is exploring appropriate safeguarding measures. A Smarter Comms letter has been sent to DCs updating them of this matter and an FSA news story has been published. Relevant stakeholders have also been updated.

5.7 Food Law Code of Practice – The next Food Law Code of Practice and Practice Guidance review is commencing. This will be a large body of work that will impact on all teams in Northern Ireland as each policy team will be responsible for amendments to their relevant sections of the Code and Practice Guidance. Timescales are tight and policy changes need to be agreed by March 2024. One aspect of the work will be to consider appropriate incorporation of the non-statutory guidance produced in October last year for district councils setting out the operational requirements of the Windsor Framework, the respective roles of competent authorities, and responsibilities in enforcing GB standards on the Northern Ireland market.

5.8 Lough Neagh Incident Management and Co-ordination Group (IMCG) – We continue to hold IMCG meetings with colleagues across the FSA in response to the algal bloom in Lough Neagh. Colleagues from the Science, Evidence and Research Directorate are working on risk assessments. The risk assessment for food safety will be published in the next few months once this has been reviewed and received assurance from the Advisory Committee for the Microbiological Safety of Food, at which stage we will issue communications to stakeholders and consumers.

5.9 Approvals Training for DAERA and DC Officers – The team delivered ‘Approvals – The Basics’ training for DAERA and DC colleagues. The training has also been recorded as six bitesize modules, and along with a resources document, are available to DCs and DAERA for reference and training purposes.

5.10 NIFDA Awards – The FSA is sponsoring the Healthier Product Innovation Award at the 2024 Northern Ireland Food and Drink Awards. The award recognises the commitment of food businesses in producing healthier products. Entries are now open and welcomed from food manufacturers in Northern Ireland that have reformulated or developed a new prepacked food product with reduced calories, sugars, saturated fat and/or salt. The Awards were launched on 10th January and the winner will be announced at the awards ceremony on Friday 15th March.

5.11 Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee – We are working with The Executive Office and other Northern Ireland departments to prepare for additional scrutiny requirements that may arise following enactment of The Windsor Framework (Democratic Scrutiny) Regulations 2023, and develop a common understanding of how we are to engage with the Committee once it is constituted.

5.12 We are developing an understanding of the processes that may apply and sharing best practice as far as possible. Our EU Relations and Legal and Assembly Liaison teams are prioritising efforts to ensure that Northern Ireland policy teams are well prepared for this potential new area of work, as they will be required to provide rapid analyses of implications of EU legislation for the Committee, alongside the existing contributions they provide for Westminster focussed scrutiny requests.

5.13 EU Clinic – We launched an EU Clinic in November to provide support for Northern Ireland policy colleagues on Northern Ireland-specific analysis of EU legislation and engagement into Northern Ireland structures. This was very useful for informing work under the Democratic Deficit workstream as part of Windsor Framework Phase II work. This builds on our monthly EU monitoring report, which we are now producing jointly with the central EU Team.

Consultations

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

Forward look:

We have the following communications activity coming up:

- 25th January – Joint event with the Institute of Food Science and Technology (IFST) focusing on regulated products reform. The event will feature FSA and IFST speakers, and a panel discussion chaired by the NIFAC Chair and FSA Board Member.
- 15th to 25th February – Northern Ireland Annual Science Festival. This will be the first time at the festival and is an opportunity to showcase the science aspects of our work

- 7th to 9th March – IFEX – We will have a stand in an opportune area of the exhibition hall, allowing proactive engagement with industry stakeholders
- 15th March – NIFDA Awards as noted in Section 5