

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Minutes of the Open Meeting on 31st October 2023

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Executive Summary

Attached are the minutes of the 31st October 2023 NIFAC meeting.

Members are invited to:

1. Agree the minutes as a true record of proceedings.

OPEN MEETING OF THE NORTHERN IRELAND FOOD ADVISORY COMMITTEE (NIFAC) ON TUESDAY 31 OCTOBER 2023 AT QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY BELFAST

NIFAC Members?

- Anthony Harbinson – Chair
- Lorraine Crawford
- Greg Irwin?
- Ciaran McCartan?
- Cathal McDonnell?
- Ellen Finlay

FSA Officials

- Anjali Juneja – Director of UK and International Affairs
- Andy Cole – Director for Northern Ireland
- Kathryn Baker – Head of Food Safety Policy and Delivery
- Roberta Ferson – Head of Corporate Services and Strategic Engagement
- Sharon Gilmore – Head of Standards and Dietary Health
- Firth Piracha – Head of EU Relations, Trade and Legislation
- Ed McDonald – Food Fraud Liaison Officer
- Ruth Watson – Head of Finance, Business Support and Communications
- Jayne McGlaughlin – Senior Advisor – Assembly Liaison
- Michael Sewell – Advisor – Assembly Liaison

External Attendees

- Professor Nigel Scollan – Director IGFS
- Professor Chris Elliott – Founder IGFS
- Dr Nick Birse - IGFS

External Presenters

- Professor Nigel Scollan – Director IGFS
- Professor Chris Elliott – Founder IGFS

Apologies

- Lynne McMullan – NIFAC Committee Member

1. Welcome and Housekeeping

1.1 The Chair welcomed all NIFAC members, FSA officials and presenters to the meeting.

2. FSA Food Fraud/Food Crime Presentation

2.1 The Chair invited Ed McDonald to deliver his presentation to the Committee.

2.2 Ed outlined the FSA's role and position in respect to food fraud and food crime. He provided an overview of the National Food Crime Unit's (NFCU) role, highlighting its investigative and intelligence gathering functions.

2.3 Ed shared examples of food crime, previous NFCU operational activity, and training which had been delivered to improve district councils' understanding of intelligence gathering techniques and investigation skills.

2.4 Future work will focus on education, whistleblowing, and engagement with central government to secure Police and Criminal Evidence (Northern Ireland) Order (PACE) powers in Northern Ireland.

2.5 The Committee considered the difficulties involved in detecting food fraud and asked how detention and enforcement are dealt with. Ed said that the NFCU takes a holistic approach that overlaps with partners.

2.6 NIFAC wanted to know if many fraudulent products reach retailers. Ed explained that although this does occur, retailers can minimise the risk of fraudulent products by ensuring that they only use trusted suppliers, regularly check their supplier's products and procedures and try to shorten their supply chains as this reduces vulnerabilities.

2.7 Members asked if the NFCU works with the EU for intelligence gathering purposes. Ed said that the NFCU still had contact relationships with the EU and did still exchange information on areas of concern.

3. The Institute for Global Food Security (IGFS) Presentation

3.1 The Chair invited Director of The Institute for Global Food Security (IGFS), Professor Nigel Scollan, to deliver his presentation to the Committee.

3.2 The presentation covered the IGFS's approach to increasing food security, including a focus on food integrity, sustainability, and economic issues. Nigel drew attention to the connection between food, planetary issues, and health. The IGFS works closely with industry and government in this space.

3.3 There has been a major focus on food safety and integrity, animal welfare, and technological readiness. Nigel emphasised that fundamental science is necessary for delivery in the real world.

3.4 A number of spinout companies have come from the IGFS, including [Bia Analytical](#), a leading food authentication testing laboratory.

3.5 Next the Committee received a presentation from founder of IGFS, Professor Chris Elliott. Chris led the UK Government's independent review following the 2013 horsemeat incident. His recommendations led to the establishment of the [Food Industry Intelligence Network](#), the largest repository of information about food authenticity. Chris also highlighted the [Food Authenticity Network](#), the world's largest repository of information related to testing for food fraud.

3.6 Chris explained that the positive working relationship between the IGFS, NFCU & Scottish Food Crime and Incidents Unit (SCFCIU) is globally unique and significant.

3.7 Chris noted that all food is vulnerable to food crime and that this can be exacerbated by financial pressures. He explained that supply chain resilience cannot be achieved without traceability and transparency.

3.8 NIFAC noted the use of AI and data, and asked if there are other data sources that the IGFS would like to acquire. Chris said that the IGFS are currently trying to acquire climate data.

3.9 Members asked if a consumer version of a Bia Analytical device to identify food fraud had been considered. Chris said that discussions had taken place around a consumer device to detect food allergens, but the device is not accurate enough.

3.10 The Committee asked Chris how audits could be improved. Chris felt that environmental health officers (EHOs) could benefit from training to help them better identify criminal activity. The IGFS developed a more comprehensive 'integrity audit' with one major retailer, but Chris acknowledged that this would not be suitable for every audit.

3.11 Members asked about the sustainability of palm oil. Chris said that only half of UK palm oil comes from certified sustainable sources, meaning companies are increasing their vulnerability to fraud.

3.12 Anthony thanked Nigel and Chris and paused the meeting for attendees to be given a tour of the IGFS facilities.

4. Minutes of the Previous Meeting

4.1 The Chair resumed the meeting and asked if there were any comments on the minutes of the previous NIFAC meeting held on 26th April 2023.

4.2 Members raised an amendment required to the attendees list. Providing that this would be rectified, attendees agreed that the minutes are an accurate record and the Secretariat agreed to publish the minutes.

5. Declarations of Interest

5.1 The Chair asked if members had any interests to declare. No interests were declared.

6. Director and Chair Updates

6.1 The Chair invited Andy Cole, Director for Northern Ireland, to present his update to the Committee.

6.2 Andy highlighted a number of issues contained within his report, including the Children's Meals Sampling Project, Ultra Processed Foods (UPFs), and Food Standards Delivery Model (FSDM).

6.3 The Chair noted that he had been nominated as the Board member responsible for borders and controls.

6.4 Members raised the need for further research into the nutritional value of UPFs. Andy noted that the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN) had been exploring this and that the FSA is currently considering how it affects our dietary health responsibilities.

6.5 Members considered how industrial action in January 2024 could impact any planned communications around the Windsor Framework. DAERA staff are responsible for delivering the green and red lanes. Border Target Operating Model (BTOM) leads in DEFRA are delivering guidance across all sectors of industry.

6.6 Members asked about the FSA's approach to CBD in Northern Ireland, as an unauthorised novel food for sale. District councils did a survey and compiled a list of all CBD manufacturers in Northern Ireland and GB, and will engage with Local Authorities in GB to raise the issue accordingly.

6.7 The Chair then provided an update about Board related activities. The Chair updated that the September Board meeting had gone well and that he had reflected the Committee's comments and considerations on each of the papers.

6.8 The Chair noted that the FSA Chief Scientific Officer, Robin May, gave an outstanding interview on The Nolan Show on behalf of the agency regarding the Lough Neagh algal bloom incident.

6.9 The Chair noted the NIFAC forward look plans. During discussions Regulated Products, Enforcement, Public Procurement, and Enhanced Registration and Working with Local Authorities had been considered as potential NIFAC themes in 2024. Where possible, FAC themes will be coordinated between Wales and Northern Ireland.

6.10 Members endorsed the coordinated approach to FAC meeting themes but noted that they hoped it would not prevent a focus on Northern Ireland specific issues.

6.11 The Chair noted that Director of UK and International Affairs, Anjali Juneja, and the Borders Team, have done an outstanding job in their work around the Windsor Framework. He also noted that the Northern Ireland Senior Management Team (SMT) had made sure that the Northern Ireland voice is heard.

7. AOB

7.1 No further business was raised, and the meeting was closed.