

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Minutes of the Themed Meeting on Wednesday 31 January 2024

Minutes of the themed NIFAC meeting on Wednesday 31 January 2024 where NIFAC explored the theme of Regulated Products Reform

Attendees and apologies

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Members:?

- Anthony Harbinson – Chair
- Lorraine Crawford – NIFAC Member
- Greg Irwin?– NIFAC Member
- Ciaran McCartan?– NIFAC Member
- Cathal McDonnell?– NIFAC Member

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
- Peter Quigley – Deputy Director of Regulatory Services
- Amy Naylor-Frizzell – Head of Future Reform
- Adam McDonnell – Food Standards Lead
- Jemma Foster – Policy Advisor (Standards)
- Ruth Watson – Head of Audit, Business Support, Assembly Liaison and Communications
- Jayne McLaughlin – Senior Advisor – Assembly Liaison
- Michael Sewell – NIFAC Secretariat

External Attendees:

- Michael Walker – The Institute of Food Science and Technology

Apologies:

- Lynne McMullan – NIFAC Member
- Ellen Finlay – NIFAC Member

1. Welcome and Housekeeping

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

2. Declarations of Interest

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

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting on 31st October 2023

3.1 The Chair asked if there were any comments on the minutes of the previous NIFAC meeting held on 31st October 2023.

3.2 Members agreed the minutes as an accurate record of the previous meeting.

4. Director and Chair Updates

4.1 The Chair invited Anjali Juneja to present her update to NIFAC.

4.2 Anjali highlighted a number of issues related to the FSA UK and International Affairs Directorate contained within the report including the return of Ministers in Northern Ireland (NI), business planning and the recent Board retreat.

4.3 The Chair invited Andy Cole to present his update to NIFAC.

4.4 Andy highlighted a number of issues related to the FSA in NI contained within the report, including nitrates/nitrites, the upcoming vending event, incidents, and the return of the Northern Ireland Executive.

4.5 Members asked about the FSA's position on dietary health and if there are any opportunities for further collaboration with Safefood. Andy confirmed that the team meets with Safefood regularly. Safefood are leading an all-island campaign, with input from the Food Safety Authority of Ireland and the Department of Health.

4.6 The Chair then provided an update on Board related activity. He noted that Tim Riley has been appointed as the new Deputy Chair of the FSA. The Chair informed the Committee that he has been appointed as the Chair of the FSA Audit and Risk Assurance Committee.

5. Regulated Products and Current Authorisation Process

5.1 The Chair invited Adam McDowell and Jemma Foster to deliver their presentation to the Committee. Their presentation provided an overview of what Regulated Products are, the current process for authorisation in NI and how that differs from Great Britain (GB).

5.2 Members considered if the ability to bring products to market that have been approved by either the EU or GB regulators could be a competitive advantage for NI.

5.3 The Committee asked if the EU's authorisation process is more efficient than the UK's. Adam explained that the difference is not currently significant, although differences between the two systems will continue to be monitored.

5.4 The Committee noted that more could be done to engage with NI stakeholders on this issue. Adam explained that the FSA in NI will continue to work with the other three nations on this issue.

6. Wider FSA Regulated Products Reform Programme

6.1 The Chair invited Peter Quigley and Amy-Naylor Frizzell to deliver their presentation to the Committee. Their presentation provided further information on the wider Regulated Products Reform Programme.

6.2 Amy and Peter informed the Committee that they had held a workshop with industry stakeholders around this issue. Although stakeholders from NI had been invited, none attended. The Committee agreed that more could be done to try and engage with stakeholders in NI, and this was something for the team to consider.

6.3 During considerations, members asked if there were any risks associated with the renewal requirements. The team explained that the policy team is working through the risks with legal, but the risks are perception based.

6.4 Members raised that they would be surprised if there is a desire in NI to move away from EU renewal requirements.

6.5 The Committee asked if the backlog of renewal applications was something that the FSA is getting direct feedback on. Amy explained that feedback generally focusses on the current process being slow and lacking transparency. The Committee noted that consumers and stakeholders want products faster, but this is not happening yet.

7. Wider FSA Regulated Products Reform Programme

7.1 The Chair invited Michael Walker from the Institute of Science and Technology (IFST) to deliver his presentation to the Committee.

7.2 Michael provided an overview of the IFST, the UK's leading Food Science professional body. Other than scientific or technical aspects, IFST are non-political and are not positioned to consider the political drivers of divergence.

7.3 Michael emphasised that the IFST is concerned that there is not sufficient resource to process applications. He noted that if there are different technical requirements for authorisations between EU and GB law, this creates added difficulties.

7.4 As a key principle, Michael was keen to emphasise that Regulated Products regulation must keep up with advances in science and technology, regulatory models, consumers perceptions and business practices.

7.5 Overall, Michael confirmed that the IFST has broad support for the immediate, interim and long-term reforms outlined in the FSA Board paper from December 2023.

8. Discussion

8.1 The Chair invited the Committee to engage in open discussion on meeting theme.

8.2 Members asked what could be done to get local stakeholders involved. The team explained that stakeholders will be consulted soon.

8.3 Members wanted to know if the red and green lanes at Points of Entry are robust enough to cover products approved in the EU but not GB. The team reassured the Committee that the system is robust enough to ensure that the correct checks take place.

8.4 Members noted that when considering a two-tiered approach, a concern is that completing the paperwork would be too large a burden for industry.

8.5 NIFAC considered concerns around the regulation of products related to animal feed. Specifically, if differences between the EU and GB could create a disparity of available feed in GB and NI. Members agreed that divergence is a multifaceted issue and suggested that England, Wales, NI, Scotland and the Republic of Ireland would need to work together to minimise issues.

9. Stakeholder Engagement Feedback/ Forward Planning

9.1 The Chair invited the Committee to consider possible stakeholder engagement opportunities for 2024. Members agreed that they would continue to consider and suggest ideas.

9.2 The Chair noted that the NIFAC secretariat will continue to liaise with the WFAC secretariat to ensure that FAC themes are aligned in 2024.

10. AOB

10.1 The Chair noted that the meeting was NIFAC member Lorraine Crawford's last meeting as a NIFAC member. Lorraine is due to finish her second term of appointment on 16th February 2024. The Chair thanked Lorraine for her significant contribution to NIFAC and wished her well in the future.

10.2 The Chair also noted that the meeting was NIFAC Secretariat Michael Sewell's last meeting. He thanked Michael for his work and wished him well in the future.