

# Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Directors' Report October 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 written report to NIFAC in April 2024.

## 2. Chief Executive's Report to the Board

2.1 The latest Chief Executive Report that was presented to the September 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 April 2024. There has been a significant change in the FSA's leadership team since April. Emily Miles announced her planned departure from the role of Chief Executive and move to DEFRA. In August an interim Chief Executive, Katie Pettifer was appointed, who is continuing to deliver the FSA's vision for the food system, food is safe, and food is what it says it is.

3.2 Since my last update the government has shared its ambition to tackle trade barriers through seeking to negotiate a veterinary/SPS agreement to help boost businesses, jobs and UK-EU trade. The FSA will work to ensure any future arrangements protect consumer interests in relation to food safety and standards across the UK. In addition, the UK Government has stated it remains committed to implementing the Windsor Framework and protecting the UK internal market, and the FSA continues to work to deliver all relevant requirements and to support the good faith implementation of the Windsor Framework.

3.3 National Level Regulation continues to be a priority for the organisation and further to the Board decision in September on next steps, the team continue to engage with the central team to ensure a clear understanding of the programme of work and the engagement plan in respect of Northern Ireland. This will be part of the discussion at the upcoming NIFAC meeting in October.

3.4 The Spending Review process is also part of wider organisation work at this time. In Northern Ireland the Department of Finance has commissioned departments, including the FSA, to set out their requirements for the three years from 2025/26 to inform the Executive's consideration of Budget 2025-28. Consistent with the other administrations, the expectation is for a very challenging spending review.

3.5 In international news, back in July, the FSA participated in a meeting of the Strategic Food Safety Dialogue – an informal forum of food regulators from the UK, European Commission, USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand that meet once per year but progress work in subgroups

throughout the year. At this year's meeting there was agreement by the group to take forward joint work on topics including veterinary resource and retention, food fraud, crisis response, and electronic certification. The group will next meet in summer 2025.

3.6 Also, in July, UK fish establishments were audited by South Korea. Auditors were extremely complimentary of the UK competent authorities' organisation and delivery of this inward inspection, including the input of the FSA and the local authorities, especially because it was the first of its kind to the UK. All four establishments audited (who export cooked whelks to South Korea) 'passed' their inspections which means market access is maintained for these establishments. UK exports of seafood products to South Korea were worth £8.7m in 2023. The FSA's role is critical as we secure LA input, support the establishments before and during the inspections and present to the auditing authorities our Official Control regime.

3.7 In recent weeks I have supported our Chair in meetings with Baroness Hayman and Jayne Bryant MS in Wales, Minister for Mental Health and Early Years. I've also met with the Chief Veterinary Officer for Northern Ireland and had a catch up about ongoing delivery and performance under the service level agreement arrangements.

## 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 written report in April 2024.

4.2 **Regulated Products Reform** – The UK-wide consultation on reforms to the UK market authorisation process closed in June. All Northern Ireland respondents either agreed or strongly agreed with the proposals. Following consultation, the FSA and Food Standards Scotland are seeking Ministerial agreement to legislate for the proposed reforms.

4.3 **Food Standards Delivery Model** – Following the publication of the revised Food Law Code of Practice in June 2023, work has been taking place to implement the new Food Standards Delivery Model. Belfast City Council is scheduled to implement the new model in October 2024, with the remaining ten district councils scheduled to implement it from November. The team continues to hold fortnightly information drop-in sessions for district councils.

4.4 **Partnership with Northern Ireland Hotels Federation** – In April, we partnered with the Northern Ireland Hotels Federation to launch a 'Choice for Children' initiative that highlights the importance of food choices for children. The new dishes had to meet the healthier criteria outlined in the FSA's Healthier catering tips for children's menus [guidance](#). Shortlisted dishes were promoted via social media with the public having the opportunity to vote for their favourite. The winner was the Merchant Hotel with its 'Glenarm Organic Salmon, Armagh asparagus, spring greens and pea sauce' meal. We are now looking forward to working with other businesses to increase the availability of healthy options on children's menus.

4.5 **Making Food Better Tracker Survey** – The annual [Making Food Better Tracker Survey](#) was published in April. This survey is a continuation of the Eating Well Choosing Better Tracker Survey and monitors consumers' perceptions of healthier options and reformulation, calorie information, the use of traffic light labels and knowledge and understanding of the recommended daily calorie intake.

4.6 **Data from Kantar's Worldpanel** – We purchased data from Kantar's Worldpanel on take home food and drink purchasing. A [report](#) outlining the FSA's results and analysis of purchasing from 2018 to 2022 in Northern Ireland has subsequently been published.

**4.7 Evaluation of Vending Guidance in Health and Social Care Settings Across Northern Ireland** – NIFAC members received this [report](#), which was published in September and evaluates the nutritional guidance for vending machines across the five Health and Social Care (HSC) trusts in Northern Ireland. The Revised Nutritional Standards in HSC settings for staff and visitor catering were launched in 2022 and outline nutritional guidelines for vending machines selling confectionary, savoury snacks and cold drinks. Results indicate that the vending guidance may have positively impacted nutritional purchasing with no negative impact on vending sales.

**4.8 Canadian Audit** – In September, teams across the FSA in Northern Ireland supported an inward audit by Canadian Authorities to several processing establishments and cold stores across the UK, including some in Northern Ireland. The delegation was particularly interested in the dynamics of the FSA's way of working with Eville and Jones, and our approach to incidents management.

**4.9 Northern Ireland National Reference Laboratories (NRLs)** – We published the tenders for the Northern Ireland NRLs in May. They have been shared with the European Reference Laboratories to promote applications from across the EU. The team is on track to award tenders in the Autumn, in good time before the current contracts end in March 2025.

**4.10 Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee** – In June, the FSA appeared before the Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee for the first time. The Committee considers the impacts for Northern Ireland of all new EU legislation notified to it and may hold inquiries into those measures that it considers require detailed analysis. The session focused on an EU Directive which amends compositional, labelling and processing rules for four EU Directives relating to honey, fruit juice, jams and marmalades, and preserved milks. These make up four out of a package of seven EU Directives, known colloquially as the 'Breakfast Directives.'

Questions from MLAs related to engagement with stakeholders, potential opportunities for artisanal businesses, clarity and choice for consumers, and the range of goods that would be able to move within the UK internal market. Following a vote and discussion, the Committee agreed that they would not hold an inquiry on the matter.

**4.11 Windsor Framework** – In May, Northern Ireland policy teams led positive discussions with EU counterparts on several priority areas. At an official level working group meeting, the FSA lead had a productive discussion on amended EU legislation concerning nitrates and nitrites, smoke flavourings and recycled plastics. The EU was very open to direct contact with the Northern Ireland team on technical questions on implementation in Northern Ireland. At another meeting, we agreed to hold a detailed discussion on listeria in ready to eat foods and the EU agreed to promote our procurement on NRLs.

**4.12 Bread and Flour Positive Commission Opinion** – In February, we notified the EU Commission of draft changes to our Northern Ireland Bread and Flour Regulations. Following this, the Commission consulted the Standing Committee on Plants, Animals, Food and Feed. Two UK delegates (Richard Annett from the FSA and Andrew Herd from the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC)) attended this meeting to present information.

The standstill period ended on 8th August and the Commission concluded that the notified measure pursues a legitimate objective (the protection of public health) and that the restrictions which ensue from this measure are appropriate and proportionate to the objective pursued. This is an excellent result, and testament to the collaborative working within the FSA and across UK departments. This was our first notified measure and the first UK officials attending an EU Standing Committee since EU Exit.

**4.13 Lough Neagh Fish Samples** – Samples of fish have been lifted from the Lough monthly since May and sent to AFBI in Northern Ireland for sample preparation. The team has been working over the summer with procurement colleagues to set up contracts with labs for analysis

work. At the start of September, the first batch of samples were sent to European labs and samples for USA labs are prepped and ready for dispatch once the import permit paperwork has been completed.

**4.14 Training for Northern Ireland Competent Authorities** – Officials have been providing a range of training to Competent Authorities:

- Operational Policy and Delivery colleagues provided face to face training on 10th and 27th June around legal requirements pertaining to fresh meat. This was delivered to over 70 candidates from the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) and district councils (DCs). This was on the back of feedback received through the Northern Ireland Official Controls Forum requesting a knowledge refresh as the cohort had different levels of knowledge and to provide a networking platform to improve communication between the two competent authorities.
- In June, the Consumer Protection team delivered a presentation to 120 Environmental Health Officers on the role that the FSA plays in outbreak investigations. This was positively received by the Public Health Agency and DC colleagues.
- The Consumer Protection team also delivered Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) training to DAERA Portal Staff from Belfast, Larne and Warrenpoint Ports across two sessions in May. In total over 50 vets and inspectors were trained on how to communicate food safety border rejections correctly. Training also covered a background to RASFF, when to seek risk management advice from the FSA and how to inform the FSA and inland authorities of issues that have bypassed the ports.

**4.15 Northern Ireland Food Managers Conference** – In September officials from across the FSA in Northern Ireland attended and delivered presentations to DC officers from across Northern Ireland at the first Northern Ireland Food Managers Group Food Safety Conference. Topics presented by FSA included: Updates on Modernisation of the Food Hygiene Delivery Model, Intelligence and insights into food fraud and an update on the Food Standards Delivery Model. The Conference was also attended by industry and representatives from academic institutions. The conference provided the first opportunity since the pandemic for officers from across Northern Ireland to come together to receive face-to-face training, and an opportunity to meet fellow colleagues and collaborate with external stakeholders.

**4.16 DAERA Service Level Agreement (SLA)** – The SLA between DAERA and the FSA has been signed and agreed for 2024/25. The annual review of the SLA will commence in October.

DAERA also held Learning and Development/update days in June. The FSA update covered the following:

- Amendments to Regulation 853/2004 on 9 May 2024
- Update on the MSM consultation
- Implementation of Chronos (the FSA enforcement recording platform) within DAERA
- EU compliance vs Trade compliance.

**4.17 Meat Charging Policy** – In September the FSA issued a call for evidence to identify if and how discounts applied to charges for official controls and other official activities for businesses in the meat sector provide benefits to businesses and consumers, and value for money for Government. Evidence submitted in response to this call which went across Northern Ireland, England and Wales, will be used to:

- Assess whether the FSA should advise Ministers to retain discounts on charges and on the appropriate balance of charges and discounts at the strategic level
- Help the FSA to understand perceptions of the effects of the discount from consumers,

stakeholders and other interested parties and

- Provide insights into possible simplification options to make the scheme more straightforward.

**4.18 Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) Consultative Council** – Officials presented to the FSAI's [Consultative Council](#) in September on FSA experiences of developing and rolling out the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS). This is to help inform FSAI consideration of developing a similar consumer information scheme in the Republic of Ireland. The team has also been invited to present again to the FSAI's Scientific Committee in October.

**4.19 MR FOODS Investigation/Prosecution** - This investigation commenced following sampling of kebabs by FSAI. The Northern Ireland Consumer Protection team and Food Fraud Liaison officer (FFLO) were involved in managing and investigating this as an incident investigation. The FFLO assisted the relevant district council throughout. The Food Business Owner pleaded guilty to two offences and the sentencing is due to take place on 7th October.

**4.20 AWARE NI Investor's in Mental Health Gold Award** – Following an application to Aware NI's [Mental Health Awards](#), we have been awarded the Investors in Mental Health Gold Standard Award – the highest of the tiers which is only presented to a select number of organisations across Northern Ireland. This is a fantastic achievement, which recognises the ongoing effort invested into ensuring staff wellbeing is supported. It also builds on our receipt of the [Mental Health Charter](#) (bronze level), which we achieved on behalf of the FSA as a whole, in April. Led by our Wellness Works (WW) team the application was largely based on showcasing the work of the WW team. AWARE NI was also the Northern Ireland staff chosen charity for last year. The team will be picking up the certificate at a ceremony on 8th November.

**4.21 Balmoral Show (May 2024)** – Our stand at the Balmoral Show engaged thousands of visitors over the three-day event including the First and deputy First Ministers, Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, the then Minister of Health, and Doug Beattie MLA. The food safety themed kitchen tested visitor's knowledge through an interactive fridge game and quiz, while giveaways in the form of branded cool bags, food safety clips and tote bags were in high demand.

Our food fraud liaison officer conducted a targeted walkaround, engaging with stakeholders ranging from the Livestock and Meat Commission to Moy Park, to promote the Food Crime Confidential Hotline. Then Chief Executive Emily Miles also attended and met with key stakeholders, including the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), the Ulster Farmers' Union and Food NI.

**4.22 All-island Food Poverty Event** – In September we attended the All-island Food Poverty Network event in Belfast. The theme of the event was 'Changing how we talk about food poverty'. The Minister of Health, Mike Nesbitt MLA, provided the opening remarks followed by presentations on how food poverty is communicated on the island of Ireland (University of Galway), community experiences (Foodstock) and how to reframe communications (Frameworks UK). Sharon Gilmore chaired the Q&A session and provided closing remarks for the event which was attended by over 130 delegates.

**4.23 NI Food to Go Roadshow** - The FSA had a stand at the NI Food to Go Roadshow in September the Guildhall, Derry/Londonderry. The event was attended by Food Business Owners that provide food to go products. The FSA provided advice on managing food safety including allergens, healthier catering, FHRS and food fraud resilience.

**4.24 Engagement** – In addition to the excellent engagement that we had with stakeholders through events such as the Balmoral Show, we have also undertaken a number of other key engagements in recent months including meetings with the Senior Management Teams in FSAI and safefood.

I accompanied the FSA Chair and NIFAC Chair during their meeting with the new Minister of Health, Mike Nesbitt MLA in July. This was an extremely positive meeting with the Minister and there was agreement to meet again in the coming months.

In August, I met Baroness Hayman, the Parliamentary under Secretary of State for the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs, and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP, at Belfast Port. The Ministers took great interest in the work of the FSA and DC-led public health controls at Northern Ireland Points of Entry and were keen to understand how this has changed since the UK left the EU.

The interim Chief Executive, Katie Pettifer, Anjali Juneja and I attended the NIFDA Annual Dinner on 3rd October 2024 and engaged with industry stakeholders. As part of her engagements in her new post, Katie also met with the Department of Health Permanent Secretary, Peter May at the beginning of October.

## **5. Consultations**

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

## **6. Forward Look**

- 9th, 16th, 23rd October 2024 – Three cross-government Lough Neagh stakeholder events are planned for October 2024 at three different venues around the Lough. The FSA will have a stand at each event to explain its role and work to date in relation to fish sampling etc.
- 16th October – FSA in Northern Ireland and safefood Senior Management Teams meeting.
- 23rd October – Local Authority team presenting on the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme to the FSAI Scientific Committee.
- 11th November – FSA in Northern Ireland and FSAI Senior Management Teams meeting.