

Report from the Chair of the Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee

FSA 24/12/11 - Report by Anthony Harbinson, FSA Board Member for Northern Ireland and Chair of the Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee

1. Summary

1.1 This report from the Chair of the Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) reports on the activity of the Committee from the period December 2023 to November 2024.

1.2 The Board is asked to **note** the activities of NIFAC and **comment** on the current forward look plans.

2. Introduction

2.1 The role of NIFAC is defined in the Food Standards Act 1999 and acts as an advisory body to the Food Standards Agency (FSA). It is chaired by the Board Member for Northern Ireland and its role is to advise the FSA on food safety and standards issues, with particular emphasis on Northern Ireland.

2.2 NIFAC Members provide a wide range of expertise, experience and practical knowledge to the FSA. All Members are recruited through open public appointment competition and are appointed by the Minister of Health in Northern Ireland.

2.3 The Committee works closely with the FSA both in Northern Ireland and beyond and seeks to support the FSA's strategic outcomes.

2.4 This paper highlights the themes that have been considered and discussed by NIFAC over the last year, visits which have taken place, as well as looking forward to the work of the Committee in the next 12 months.

3. Committee Membership

3.1 The Committee has a complement of eight Members, one of whom is also the FSA Board Member for Northern Ireland and NIFAC Chair.

3.2 There is a wide range of expertise amongst the Committee, including backgrounds in industry, academia, nutrition, research and development and education. The biographies for all NIFAC Members can be found [here](#). This wide-ranging experience as well as Members' associated networks and insights has been extremely useful for NIFAC discussions.

3.3 During the reporting period, two NIFAC Members finished their terms of appointment. The Committee wishes to put its thanks on record for the work of Lorraine Crawford and Ellen Finlay during their terms of appointment, including the insight and experience they brought to discussions.

3.4 A public appointments exercise took place at the end of 2023, with interviews taking place in early 2024. Following the exercise, three new NIFAC Members were appointed by the Minister of Health in Northern Ireland – Judith Hanvey, Dr Janice McConnell and Dr Mike Johnston. All three Members were appointed from 1 April 2024 for 3 years. Another Member, David Torrens, has also been appointed to replace Greg Irwin who is due to finish his second term of appointment in March 2025.

3.5 Additionally, Cathal McDonnell, Dr Lynne McMullan and Ciaran McCartan have been reappointed for second terms.

4. Committee Meetings

4.1 Since the last report to the Board, three NIFAC themed meetings have taken place. Each theme has provided the Committee with the opportunity to consider issues from a country specific perspective, enabling discussion and consideration of a number of relevant themes and matters.

4.2 Over the last year, the Committee has considered the following themes:

4.3 **Market Authorisation modernisation** – In January, NIFAC considered the theme of Market Authorisation modernisation (previously Regulated Products reform). The Committee received presentations from FSA officials in relation to the background to Regulated Products and explored the modernisation programme. The Committee received a presentation from Michael Walker, a representative from the Institute of Food Science and Technology. Overall, the Committee was supportive of the objectives of the programme but noted that it needs to be balanced, as the current process already requires a lot of work for businesses. Members also highlighted the importance of stakeholder engagement, and that careful consideration needed to be given about engagement in Northern Ireland.

4.4 **The food business landscape in Northern Ireland and factors which may impact innovation and growth** – The April meeting was held at Deli Lites in Warrenpoint which is an artisan food-to-go producer based in Northern Ireland. The Committee heard from Cathal McDonnell who is a NIFAC Member and Operations and Technical Director at Deli Lites and NIFAC Member, Ciaran McCartan, who is an Innovation Adviser at Invest NI. During deliberations, the Committee explored and discussed several areas that may impact innovation and growth in Northern Ireland, including affordability; sustainability; political uncertainty; health; occasion and convenience. Following the presentations, the Committee had the opportunity to undertake a tour of the production facilities.

4.5 **Local Authority engagement** – Four representatives from district councils in Northern Ireland attended the October meeting and presented on various topics. They provided the Committee with an insight into the ongoing efforts to ensure food is what it says it is, with presentations delivered on the Environmental Health structure in Northern Ireland, the Food Standards Delivery Model, allergens and successful prosecutions. The Committee discussed pressures and resourcing and the challenges that district councils face in terms of growing demand and evolving risks, particularly in relation to allergens. The Committee also heard from FSA colleagues in relation to National Level Regulation. The exchange of information was extremely beneficial, and the Committee is keen to ensure that there is annual engagement of this nature with district council representatives.

4.6 Throughout the year, the Committee also met to consider the papers ahead of each Board meeting. These Board preparation meetings enable NIFAC to consider the published Board papers and provide a devolved perspective, enabling me as NIFAC Chair and Board Member for Northern Ireland to feedback nation specific comments and questions during Board meetings.

4.7 Board preparation meetings have also been used as an opportunity to deliver on NIFAC's commitment to greater visibility and stakeholder engagement, both internally and externally. The Committee undertook a visit to St Louise's Comprehensive College in Belfast in December 2023 where Members had the opportunity to observe several lessons. The Committee also heard from the Education Authority Catering Service with responsibility for the provision of school meals in grant aided schools and had a presentation in relation to food in the school curriculum. The organisation of this visit was supported by two NIFAC Members who were able to use their networks to develop agenda items.

4.8 The Committee has also taken the opportunity to engage with specific teams in the FSA in Northern Ireland. In June, NIFAC had a spotlight session with the Incidents team and in September, NIFAC had a similar session with the Communications team. These spotlight sessions have been a worthwhile undertaking in helping NIFAC understand more about the work of the teams in Northern Ireland and the issues they are dealing with.

5. Review of the Food Advisory Committees (FACs)

5.1 The recommendations set out in the Review of the FACs [paper](#), presented to the Board in June 2023, continue to be implemented by the FAC Secretariats in both Northern Ireland and Wales. This includes, as far as possible, aligning themes discussed by both Committees. For example, both FACs have considered Market Authorisation modernisation, the food business landscape and Local Authority issues over the course of the last 12 months.

5.2 I continue to work with the Board Member for Wales and Chair of the Welsh Food Advisory Committee (WFAC), Dr Rhian Hayward, to ensure that the Committees are operating in the most efficient and effective way and that they are best placed to provide country specific advice.

6. Forward Look

6.1 The Committee is currently developing a forward work programme for 2025 which will be discussed at the NIFAC meeting in December. This is being done in close association with the WFAC team to ensure that the FACs are as closely aligned as possible. Plans are also in development for a joint meeting of the FACs which we are proposing to do on an annual basis moving forward. This will help to build relationships between the FACs and help to foster wider information sharing.

6.2 Members are keen to ensure that they are considering areas which are prevalent or an emerging issue for the FSA at that time, and we will flex the forward plan as required. As part of my role as Chair, I will continue to engage with the FSA Chair, WFAC Chair and Executive Management team to help to identify issues and areas where the FACs can add value.

6.3 Currently, the suggested themes for 2025 cover areas including: Nutrition and the launch of the new Obesity Prevention Strategy for Northern Ireland; Market Authorisation modernisation; regulatory control and engagement with district councils.

6.4 NIFAC Board preparation meetings will continue to focus on papers being discussed by the Board, with particular attention placed on areas of relevance to Northern Ireland. Where possible, Board preparation meetings will also be used to undertake relevant visits or continue the spotlight series of teams and relevant policy areas across the FSA in Northern Ireland.

6.5 The Committee will continue its commitment to stakeholder engagement and raising the visibility of NIFAC, including holding meetings and visits across Northern Ireland. This will also include attendance at relevant events such as the Balmoral Show. As part of the forward work plan, the Committee will also be undertaking a stakeholder mapping exercise, including already

established networks which can be utilised and drawn from.

7. Conclusions

7.1 NIFAC has considered a range of themes over the last 12 months and has appreciated the input from colleagues both within the FSA and externally.

7.2 The Committee will take 2025 as an opportunity to continue to engage with a wide range of stakeholders in Northern Ireland and seek to build the relationship between the FACs.

7.3 The Board is asked to **note** the activities of NIFAC and **comment** on the current forward look plans.