

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee Directors' Report – February 2025

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Directors' Report February 2025

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 the Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) in October 2024.

1.2 Members are invited to:

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

2. Chief Executive's Report to the Board

2.1 The latest Chief Executive Report that was presented to the December 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 October.

3.2 Since the last update to NIFAC, it has been confirmed that the FSA Chair, Professor Susan Jebb, has been [reappointed](#) for a further term until 31 December 2027. It has also been announced that Katie Pettifer has been [appointed](#) as the Chief Executive of the FSA. Katie served as interim Chief Executive since September 2024 and was previously the FSA's Director of Strategy.

3.3 Over the last few months, I have been working on a number of areas, both in the wider UKIA Directorate and specifically in Northern Ireland. In the run up to Christmas the port of Holyhead was forced to close due to the damage sustained by Storm Darragh. This caused major disruption to passenger and freight movements; and as trade was redirected at short notice, this led to an increased level of movements directly into Belfast, putting pressure on the team in Northern Ireland and colleagues in the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA). The team in Northern Ireland closely engaged with colleagues in Wales as well to ensure we were able to fully understand the impact and support progress as needed. It was good to hear in mid-January that the port has partially reopened, easing pressure on colleagues and allowing trade to go back to near normal.

3.4 Elsewhere my focus has been on the UK Government Spending Review, as it continues to form a major part of the wider organisation's work at this time with the focus of HM Treasury moving to the 2026/27 and 2027/28 financial years. Within UKIA and the wider organisation we have started the business planning process and associated Westminster budget allocations, which the teams in Northern Ireland need to incorporate into their plans and budgeting for the year. The Northern Ireland draft budget is out for consultation at present and is due to close on 13

March. Once we have confirmation of final budget, we will work through our relevant allocations for 2025/26.

3.5 In early December there was widespread discussion on social media, reported in mainstream media, about the safety of an animal feed additive which had previously been through the FSA Market Authorisation process. This discussion followed an announcement by the food manufacturer Arla that it would be carrying out trials to assess the efficacy of the additive in reducing methane emissions on some farms and was unfortunately fuelled by some misinformation. The FSA issued a statement, Robin May gave media interviews, and we produced a blog setting out the facts. We explained that the additive was authorised as safe for use in the UK, and in other countries including the EU, Australia, Canada and the US. In our safety assessment, the FSA had concluded that at the intended dose it posed no safety concerns to consumers, animals or the environment and had advised Ministers to authorise the feed additive in GB. In relation to Northern Ireland, all feed additives that are authorised for use within the EU, including Northern Ireland, are subject to a scientific assessment by the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). EFSA concluded that use of the Bovaer additive in the feed of dairy cows poses no concern for the safety of consumers of dairy products.

3.6 Alongside the team in Northern Ireland, I recently met with the Senior Management Team of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI), including their Chief Executive, Dr Pamela Byrne. We touched on a number of areas of mutual interest including the Windsor Framework, Border Target Operating Model, incidents and technical training programmes.

3.7 This year will mark 25 years of the FSA, and we are busy preparing for both internal and external celebrations to mark this significant milestone.

3.8 Another area of focus in the coming year will be work to support the cross-Government work to reset the relationship with the EU, including work on a potential Sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) agreement which is a UK Government manifesto commitment.

3.9 Looking ahead to future engagements, I will be attending the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association Conference in March where Katie Pettifer is due to give a keynote speech. I will also be hosting the UKIA-wide Away Day in Belfast in April and look forward to showcasing Northern Ireland to my wider Directorate.

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 report in October.

4.2 **Bread and Flour** – Alongside officials in Wales, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) and Food Standards Scotland, we have been undertaking a four-nation review of the Bread and Flour Regulations 1998 and the Bread and Flour Regulations (Northern Ireland) 1998. The review fell under the arrangements of the Food Compositional Standards and Labelling provisional Common Framework. The general aim of the review was to ensure that the Regulations lead to improved public health, support UK industry, assist enforcement authorities and protect consumers. This includes:

- Raising the minimum level of calcium carbonate, iron and niacin and replacing the criteria for the calcium carbonate specification taking into account developments in overlapping food legislation.
- Providing clarification on the scope of mandatory fortification requirements.?
- Introducing exemptions where public health objectives would not be compromised.
- A move to improvement notices for enforcement.?

4.3 The review has also involved close working with the Department of Health in Northern Ireland (DoH), the Department of Health and Social Care and the Scottish and Welsh Governments in relation to the mandatory fortification of non-wholemeal wheat flour with folic acid to help prevent neural tube defects in foetuses. This was agreed by the UK Government and devolved administrations in 2021, following a consultation in 2019. It was coordinated as part of the wider review, with the Regulations being used as a legislative vehicle for the implementation of folic acid policy.?

4.4 The Bread and Flour (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 have been made in Northern Ireland and include a transitional adjustment period for industry, with the new compositional requirements coming into force on 13 December 2026.

4.5 Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRS) presentation to FSAI – In October, we presented to FSAI's Scientific Committee on our journey and experience of developing and implementing the FHRS. The FSAI Scientific Committee has been tasked with a 12-month project to consider the effectiveness of existing food information schemes to inform decisions in the Republic of Ireland. The session itself was engaging, with a variety of different questions and we have agreed to help inform future discussions of the Committee.

4.6 Lough Neagh events – In October 2024, we attended the three cross-government Lough Neagh stakeholder events. These took place at three different venues around the Lough. The events provided government departments with the opportunity to explain their work plans and actions to improve the health of Lough Neagh. We set out our work to assess food safety issues and the event was attended by local residents and businesses who use the Lough.

4.7 Lough Neagh visit with Northern Ireland National Reference Laboratory (NRL) – The FSA previously secured additional funding for one of the Northern Ireland NRLs, Wageningen, to develop a method to quantify total toxin load across a range of fish organs to measure the total concentration of microcystins. This project aims to develop a usable method for the benefit of future Northern Ireland fish testing and extend the range of available testing within the EU. Wageningen attended the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute for an Official Lab visit in November 2024 and asked the FSA to organise a visit to Lough Neagh to understand our landscape and fisheries better. We worked with Lough Neagh fisheries to organise a boat trip to allow Wageningen to see their nets being set.??

4.8 Northern Ireland Portal Infrastructure – Construction of the permanent SPS facilities is progressing in line with 1 July 2025 completion date set by the Windsor Framework. We are continuing to provide input to this in our role as Central Competent Authority for food safety and public health in this context. Our focus is to ensure critical operational elements for the four Northern Ireland Points of Entry are in place in time and these support effective use of the facilities by district councils. We are involved in detailed planning for this with district councils and DAERA ahead of the designation of the new facilities as being compliant with official control legislation.

4.9 Democratic Consent vote – On 10 December, the Northern Ireland Assembly voted in favour of the continued application of Articles 5 to 10 of the Windsor Framework concerning customs and movements of goods etc., but also the application of EU food and feed law in Northern Ireland. The Windsor Framework will continue to apply as it does currently. As the vote passed without cross-community support, the next vote will take place in 4 years, and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has commissioned an independent review of the functioning of the Windsor Framework and its implications for social, economic and political life in Northern Ireland.

4.10 The Rt. Hon. Lord Murphy of Torfaen (former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland) will lead the review, with the report due by 9 July 2025. The review will involve consultation with Northern Ireland political parties, businesses, civil society groups, representative organisations,

and trade unions, as well as substantive discussion and engagement with the UK Government. We are closely monitoring the development of the review.

4.11 Mustard products contaminated with peanuts – We have been involved in the non-routine incident relating to the contamination of mustard products with peanuts. The FSA took immediate action to control the risk, including precautionary advice to consumers with a peanut allergy and numerous product withdrawals and recalls. The precautionary advice has since been lifted and the incident has been de-escalated due to the assurance provided through FSA and local authority investigations.

4.12 UK-Wide public consultation on Market Authorisation applications – On 18 December 2024, the FSA launched a public consultation as part of the UK Market Authorisation process. Food Standards Scotland also launched a parallel consultation in early January. The consultation includes 10 applications on genetically modified organisms (GMOs), novel foods, food contact materials, feed additives, and food flavourings.

4.13 Literature search of strategies to improve children’s menu offerings – The contract for the literature search of strategies to improve children’s menu offerings has been awarded to Harlow Consulting Services Limited. This research aims to explore the effectiveness of initiatives in improving the nutritional content of children’s meals, and in encouraging consumers to order healthier children’s meals. It will also investigate motives and barriers to food businesses’ participation in initiatives to improve nutritional content of children’s meals. To consider sustainability, research will also explore the impact of such initiatives on profitability and food waste and what conclusions literature has currently reached. This research will inform future work of the Making Food Better programme by understanding how to lead and support food businesses to implement strategies to improve the nutritional offering of children’s restaurant meals. The report will be published in July 2025.

4.14 Mapping the food environment – The contract for the project on mapping the food environment has been awarded to Cada Consulting. This research aims to map the density of fast-food outlets and supermarkets in Northern Ireland, and their proximity to secondary schools as well as to investigate the relationship between fast-food outlets density and areas of deprivation. This project will add to the evidence base for the Making Food Better programme. A report on the results of this research is expected to be published in April 2025.

4.15 Cada Consulting has also been awarded the contract to map the Northern Ireland food retail environment. The research project began in January, with data expected March 2025. The Dietary Health team has also met with key stakeholders in this area, including 10 industry representatives with further stakeholder engagement planned for early 2025.

4.16 Nutritional standards – RSM UK has been commissioned to evaluate implementation of nutritional standards for vending. Three pilot sites have been recruited to the project, one local district council and two public sector sites, giving a good range of locations in which to evaluate implementation of the standards. Project initiation meetings with the team, the three pilot sites and vending operators have taken place. The implementation protocol has been finalised, and pre-implementation data is being collected.

4.17 Food and You 2 Northern Ireland Report: Wave 7-8 – The latest Food and You 2 Northern Ireland data has been published. This survey measures self-reported consumer knowledge, attitudes, and behaviours related to food safety and other food issues amongst adults. Fieldwork for Waves 7 and 8 took place between April and July 2023 and October and January 2024 respectively. Key findings are summarised in the executive summary of the report.?

4.18 Guest lecturing – In recent months, FSA officials from Northern Ireland have delivered guest lectures at both Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University. The lecture at Queen’s

looked at “the importance of market research – food trends and identifying gaps.” The Ulster University lecture was regarding the Challenge of Dietary Health Messaging – The Eatwell Guide.”

5. Consultations

5.1 Current live FSA consultations can be found here.

6. Forward Look

- 4 March – Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association Conference
- 28 March – Ulster Farmers’ Union Annual Dinner
- 14 – 17 May – Balmoral Show