

FSA Chief Executive's speech to the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Conference 2025

FSA Chief Executive Katie Pettifer addressed the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Conference 2025 on Tuesday 4 March. Speaking to an audience representing farming, manufacturing, cold storage, distribution, packaging and retailing in Northern Ireland, Katie spoke about food safety and standards in a fast-changing world.

Speech as follows:

I'm very pleased to be joining you today. This is my first visit to the Northern Ireland Food and Drink Conference since my recent appointment as the FSA's new Chief Executive. I was appointed in January, but I have spent several years as the FSA's Director of Strategy and Regulatory Compliance after coming to FSA from Ofcom, another regulator. I've been a civil servant for over twenty years, with five years of that time working specifically on Northern Ireland, so it's great to be back here.

This year we're marking the Food Standards Agency's 25th anniversary, so it feels particularly appropriate to be here with you, our valued partners in Northern Ireland, to talk about how the FSA has been supporting the food industry so far and look to the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for all of us working in the food system.

Our Heritage and Impact

The FSA's journey over the past quarter-century has been eventful. We were set up in 2000 following a series of high-profile food scares including, most significantly, the BSE crisis. Since then, we've worked with the food industry and our colleagues in local government to rebuild consumer confidence in food, and to keep people safe.

We work across England, Wales, and Northern Ireland, but our job is actually biggest here in Northern Ireland, where we cover food standards in its widest sense, including nutrition, so we can take a really holistic approach to food regulation here.

Today we have a £240 billion domestic food market in the UK, and having trusted, effective regulation provides confidence to consumers and trading partners worldwide. This is particularly resonant for Northern Ireland – a country of two million feeding more than ten million, as our Northern Ireland board member often reminds us. We regulate an industry that employs more than 4 million people across the UK, with over 100,000 jobs here in Northern Ireland, making food and drink one of the largest employment sectors in the country.

Our job is to protect public health and protect the interests of consumers in relation to food, and by doing that we protect our industry and our economy too.

For example, through our own staff and contractors in England and Wales, and our colleagues in DAERA in Northern Ireland, we inspect more than a billion animals annually, ensuring meat is safe and animal welfare standards are maintained. This work supports a meat industry worth £9 billion to the UK economy and is crucial, not just for public health, but for maintaining the UK's position as a trusted partner in the global food trade.

We say our mission is food you can trust, but we don't have a monopoly on that – we work with a wide range of delivery partners and businesses who share our aims of making sure food is safe and is what it says it is. For example, we set the framework in which our regulatory partners in local authorities deliver official controls and provide advice to around 500,000 food businesses annually - from corner shops to major food manufacturers, and one of our statutory jobs is to monitor the performance of that system.

Every year, across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, we handle more than 2,000 food incidents, ranging from labelling issues to major food safety alerts that require immediate action to protect the public. Most recently, for example, we've been working with the industry and local authorities on a very serious food incident where mustard ingredients have been contaminated with peanuts, and I know some of you will have been directly involved in that.

The impact of all of that work is reflected in consumer confidence. Within Northern Ireland, 91% of people say they're confident that the food they buy is safe to eat. Of those who know about the FSA, 77% trust the FSA to do its job of making sure that food is safe and what it says it is, so those partnerships are working to keep trust in food high.

Current Challenges and Opportunities in a Volatile World

All of us working in the food system know that we're operating in an increasingly complex and volatile environment. The global picture remains unpredictable, to say the least. As the example I've just mentioned on peanuts and mustard demonstrates, the scale and interconnectedness of global supply chains means that problems which occur up the supply chain can have far-reaching consequences. While investigations are still on-going into the cause of the contamination, our current understanding is that a single company in India supplied a UK firm who subsequently distributed the ingredients to other food businesses. The scale of the incident meant that we had to advise consumers with peanut allergies to avoid all products containing mustard while we worked urgently with businesses and local authorities to investigate what had happened. We subsequently issued 13 food alerts covering 48 affected products.

Unfortunately, we can expect to see more disruption in supply chains in the future, whether from geopolitical events or climate change. This means we need to get even better at working with businesses and regulatory partners to anticipate and respond to risks.

We also need to exploit new opportunities. One huge opportunity is the massive amount of data that's now available to the food industry. For us as a regulator, it has the potential to help us ensure that the right standards are being met across their premises and supply chains, and even to help us anticipate problems in the future. Harnessing this potential is a challenge, but one which could really deliver benefits for businesses and regulators alike.

At the same time, the pace of innovation in the food industry is reshaping consumer habits, business models, and purchasing patterns in ways we couldn't have imagined even a few years ago. The rise of practices like new food delivery models and online food sales have all presented new regulatory challenges for us, as have emerging technologies being used in food production, but they also present great opportunities for businesses and consumers.

Like many regulators, we face the challenge that innovation is happening faster than our regulatory frameworks can naturally evolve, so we need to get ahead of this, to make sure that first and foremost we can keep people safe, and to do so without getting in the way of developments that will be good for consumers and for our economy.

Unfortunately, I can't talk about challenges without talking about resourcing. Just as I know many food businesses are facing a tough financial position, so resource constraints continue to be felt across the regulatory landscape. For example, in Northern Ireland, the number of food hygiene

posts in district councils has decreased by 35% since 2012/13. Although district councils do work to flexible roles between food hygiene and food standards, this is not just about numbers – it represents a significant loss of expertise and capability within local communities.

As regulators continue to navigate a more constrained financial landscape, the rather thorny question of who should cover the cost of regulation is also becoming increasingly pressing. In England and Wales for example we are having to implement increased charges for FSA staff and contractors to inspect meat plants to reflect increases in the cost of this work.

Here in Northern Ireland, we're conducting a separate exercise regarding charge rates in approved establishments, where DAERA carries out meat hygiene official controls on our behalf. These are complex issues that require careful consideration and sometimes difficult decisions.

How the FSA is responding to these challenges

The FSA has been working to meet these challenges head-on. We're actively reforming our regulatory system and modernising our approach to business compliance checks, while ensuring consumer safety remains paramount.

For example, by the end of March, we're rolling out a new approach to food standards inspections in food businesses across all district councils here.

Our district council partners enforce food safety and standards regulations across much of the food sector, from food hygiene to composition and labelling rules. Their inspections are incredibly important - they protect consumers, underpin our Food Hygiene Rating Scheme, and provide vital advice to small businesses.

We want to make sure their efforts are directed in the most effective way, making use of some of the opportunities that greater data on the food system gives us. This is particularly important given the resource challenges we've described above.

The councils who piloted the new system, including Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council in Northern Ireland, found that it enabled their officers to spend their time in the right places. This means they're better placed to protect consumers, and support businesses – and it reduces the burden on compliant businesses.

New approaches to regulation

We're also trying out new ways of regulating for the future. You may have seen the very passionate debate that has been going on over the last year around the FSA's recent trial of national level regulation in England. This is one of the ways in which we could harness the trove of data, produced by larger businesses, that I mentioned a few minutes ago. The trial with five big retailers was designed to test whether we could look at the business level data they hold, and if analysis of this could be used, to help us assess the systems they have in place as a business to assure business compliance with food hygiene law.

The independent evaluation concluded that this approach was potentially viable, and that by using technology to combine data with boots-on-the-ground validation, we were able to pick up many of the same issues that came through in store inspections. We're currently undertaking extensive stakeholder engagement to explore the themes in more detail and working with a senior stakeholder group to assess options for using that kind of business insight in a way that adds value in the current regulatory model.

To be clear, we're not talking about self-regulation. It's smarter, more intelligence-led regulation. We think there are benefits for everyone in this.

Supporting innovation in new products

As I mentioned earlier, we're also seeing rapid innovation in new food and feed products. This is one of the areas in which FSA's role has changed a lot since EU exit, since in England and Wales we now run the pre-market authorisation system for these products. Of course, for Northern Ireland where EU law continues to apply, the EU is doing the approvals – but products that we authorise may be placed on the Northern Ireland market if eligible for, and moved through, the Northern Ireland Retail Movement Scheme.

We, and EFSA, and other regulators around the world are grappling with questions about the safety and authorisation of some ground-breaking new technologies. Innovation in the food industry could hold the key to delivering the solutions to the food system's most pressing issues – such as environmental sustainability.

We're very conscious of the potential benefit to consumers, and to the economy, that new products might bring. At the end of the day, our job is to make sure they're safe, and we will never compromise on that, but we are trying to make sure our process is streamlined and efficient. Approval processes shouldn't become bottlenecks for new ideas but rather a way of supporting products safely to market and building public confidence that they are safe.

It's important that both regulators and the industry have a shared understanding of what's needed to assure safety as new technologies develop. This month marks the launch of our innovative sandbox programme for cell-cultivated products - or CCPs. These are products like 'lab grown meat'. They're complex, novel, and require careful evaluation before they can be put on the market.

The UK represents one of Europe's largest potential markets for CCPs, and we're positioning ourselves at the forefront of this emerging technology. Currently there aren't any CCPs approved for human consumption in the UK. Through our sandbox programme we will be able to work with businesses at the cutting edge of these new technologies to support safe innovation and ultimately provide consumers with a wider choice of safe, sustainable food options.

Healthier food in Northern Ireland

For us, having food you can trust also means having food that's healthier and more sustainable, and that's a particularly important part of our work in Northern Ireland.

Making food healthier is a huge public policy challenge, and it is something we need to approach in partnership across the governments. A really good example of successful collaboration is the recent implementation of new Bread and Flour Regulations across the UK. Working alongside Defra, Food Standards Scotland and the Department of Health in Northern Ireland, we've introduced changes that will significantly impact public health, particularly through the mandatory addition of folic acid to non-wholemeal flour.

To put this in perspective, with more than 130 million slices of bread made with British flour purchased daily by 99.8% of UK households, and 85% of wheat milled in the UK being grown domestically, these changes are expected to prevent around 200 cases of neural tube defects annually. This shows what you can achieve with cross-government collaboration.

More widely, our involvement in the Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework demonstrates our commitment to systemic change.

This framework, approved by the Northern Ireland Executive and led by DAERA, represents a collaborative approach to addressing the challenges our food system faces. This is only the start of the journey and we're continuing to work with colleagues across government and with other stakeholders in Northern Ireland on delivery.

Through our Making Food Better Programme, we're working to create a healthier food environment by supporting businesses to reduce calories, saturated fat, sugar, and salt in their products, while also addressing portion sizes and promotional practices.

Our latest research [Making Food Better Tracker Survey Results] reveals some significant challenges: 76% of consumers find it most difficult to make healthy choices at takeaways; 69% struggle in fast-food restaurants; and 63% face challenges in leisure facilities. We've seen a concerning increase in those struggling with healthy choices at vending machines, rising from 29% in 2023 to 40% in 2024.

In response, we're conducting detailed mapping projects of the food environment in Northern Ireland, including analysing the retail environment, mapping the density of fast-food outlets and supermarkets and investigating their proximity to secondary schools and areas of deprivation. We've also published comprehensive guidance on healthier and more sustainable foods available in vending machines.

The Windsor Framework Context

Finally, I can't really talk about the future of food safety and standards without mentioning trade. As you'll know the UK Government is seeking to negotiate an SPS Agreement to help boost trade and deliver benefits to businesses and consumers in the UK and the EU. Our focus at the FSA will be to ensure that any agreement reached protects public health and the interests of consumers.

Meanwhile we continue to work with parties here to implement the Windsor Framework arrangement in Northern Ireland. While there may have been challenges, I would like to thank businesses for all they have done to support the implementation of the Windsor Framework. Our primary focus is to ensure that Northern Ireland receives the same level of robust public health protection as the rest of the UK, whilst facilitating the smooth movement of goods to consumers in Northern Ireland.

The FSA, working across Northern Ireland, England and Wales, along with Food Standard Scotland, has always been strongly committed to working on a four-nation basis and this continues to be the case. We use the Food and Feed Safety and Hygiene Common Framework to manage any differences in approach between the four nations. We will of course continue to engage with trade bodies and industry partners on regulatory proposals and we'll work closely with District councils, and the rest of government.

An efficient and effective regulatory system is vital for the food industry, the significant majority of whom operate to very high standards in which we can all have confidence.

Conclusion

As we face the challenges I've discussed today, the food system needs a unified response. The complexity of modern food production and distribution, combined with emerging technologies and changing consumer preferences, requires us all to work together more effectively than ever before.

The FSA remains steadfast in our commitment to protecting consumers while supporting business growth. We're determined to maintain the UK's position as having one of the safest and most trusted food systems in the world, while embracing innovation and meeting the challenges of tomorrow.

I hope everyone in this room will join us in this mission. As we mark our 25th anniversary, we're not just reflecting on the past 25 years but also actively planning for the future. We're strengthening our scientific capabilities to assess and respond to emerging risks; developing more efficient regulatory approaches that support innovation while protecting consumers; building stronger partnerships across government and industry; enhancing our data and digital capabilities; and finally supporting the development of a more sustainable food system.

The future of food safety and standards in Northern Ireland and across the UK depends on our continued collaboration, innovation, and commitment to excellence.

Thank you for your attention today, and I look forward to working with you all as we continue this important journey together.

[End of speech]