

Report from the Director for Northern Ireland

FSA 25/06/11 - Report by Andy Cole, Director for Northern Ireland

1. Summary

1.1 This paper provides a high-level overview of the work of the FSA in Northern Ireland over the last year.

1.2 It also provides an update on Northern Ireland specific priorities as well as a forward look at priorities for the coming months.

1.3 The Board is asked to:

- **assess** the effectiveness of the work in Northern Ireland to deliver FSA priorities
- **consider** the alignment of this work with the FSA's strategic direction; and
- **provide feedback** on the identified priorities.

2. Introduction

2.1 The FSA team in Northern Ireland has policy responsibility for all aspects of FSA policy, as well as the additional remit in relation to dietary health, nutrition surveillance and research, and food compositional standards and labelling, including nutrition food labelling.

2.2 In Northern Ireland, the Windsor Framework can change the dynamic of our work at times as we continue to work under EU food and feed law in Northern Ireland. This operating environment means that it is key for us to work on a four-nation basis, as well as working with the Republic of Ireland given the unique operating context of the island of Ireland.

2.3 The team also works closely with stakeholders across other government departments and district councils. These links are key to delivery and are evidenced throughout the paper.

2.4 The Northern Ireland Executive approved budgets across Northern Ireland departments on 3 April 2025. The FSA received a minor increase on our resource budget of £500k and received £151k against our capital bid of £251k. This marginal increase in resource is absorbed by increased pay and prices across payroll and programme lines and has required a careful prioritisation of our budget to ensure that we are able to continue to deliver our statutory requirements and Northern Ireland specific priorities.

3. Windsor Framework and EU Reporting Obligations

3.1 Since July 2024, the UK Government has reset and strengthened our relations with European partners by working with the EU to identify areas where we can strengthen co-operation for mutual benefit across a range of areas, including a potential sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) agreement. The UK Government is seeking to cut costs and bureaucracy to the fullest extent possible for agri goods moving between both Great Britain (GB) and the EU and GB and Northern Ireland. The UK Government has also been clear that an agreement must deliver tangible benefits for businesses and consumers in Northern Ireland. The FSA is working across Government to carefully consider and understand the public health implications of an SPS agreement with the EU. Any future arrangement of this type must protect consumers' interests in relation to food safety and standards in the UK. The UK and EU will continue to apply existing controls while the UK Government negotiates an agreement.

3.2 With 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. As a result, the team in Northern Ireland has additional EU reporting obligations and engagement with the Northern Ireland Assembly Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee (DSC). This section outlines a number of those areas.

3.3 **DSC.** The purpose of the DSC is to assist with the observation and implementation of Article 13(3a) and (4) of the Windsor Framework. These are the parts of the Framework which set out the processes for how new and amending or replacement EU law may apply in Northern Ireland. Over the last 12 months we have continued to provide written briefing to the DSC. We have taken part in three in-person DSC sessions on: changes to the EU Breakfast Directives; the EU Packaging and Packaging Waste Regulation; and the EU proposal for a Regulation on plants obtained by new genomic techniques and their food and feed. For the latter two, we worked in partnership with the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) to provide evidence. All of our input has been informed by our ongoing work to monitor and analyse EU legislation and engage with stakeholders, and it has been well received by the DSC. In addition to the public session on new genomic techniques, FSA Chief Scientific Adviser, Professor Robin May, delivered an information session on the science of gene editing for DSC members. This further underlined that we are committed to providing credible analysis and evidence to support the DSC's scrutiny of EU legislation.

3.4 **Point of Entry (POE) builds and designations.** Construction is ongoing for the four permanent inspection facilities at Northern Ireland POE. The FSA is working to ensure POE comply with EU specifications to allow the formal designation of each site by 1 July 2025, as required by the Windsor Framework. The EU is fully engaged in the process and arrangements are in place to ensure contingency facilities remain operational in the interim ahead of site readiness for occupation. Go Live preparations continue across Competent Authorities and this work is critical to ensure a smooth operational transition to the new facilities, and to protect public health and biosecurity.

3.5 **Contaminant Control Plan.** EU Regulations require the development and submission of a contaminant control plan by Northern Ireland on the monitoring of certain contaminants in food. There are two parts to the control plan. The first part covers food which is placed on the Union market, and the second part relates to food of animal origin entering the Union. The full Northern Ireland 2025-26 Contaminant Control Plan was submitted to the EU on 28 March 2025.

3.6 **National Reference Laboratories(NRLs).** Under EU Official Controls Regulations, NRLs must be designated in areas corresponding to EU Reference laboratories (EU-RLs). Under Windsor Framework arrangements, Northern Ireland NRLs must be based in an EU member state and cannot be based within Northern Ireland or GB. NRLs carry out an essential role in providing advice and support on methods for official testing to Official Laboratories. Following a lengthy re-procurement process in 2024, we have successfully awarded 15 out of 16 new

Northern Ireland NRL contracts in EU-based labs, with the new contracts starting on 1 April 2025. The gap that remains is in a newly required area and the team is engaged with EU-RL on next steps.

3.7 Anti-Microbial Resistance (AMR) reporting. The FSA is responsible for the monitoring and reporting to the European Union of AMR from fresh meats at retail sale in Northern Ireland under EU legislation. The latest corresponding report on the surveillance of AMR in *Escherichia coli* on raw fresh chicken and turkey meat in retail sale in Northern Ireland in 2024 is scheduled for publication at the end of June 2025.

3.8 While the Windsor Framework has not changed our core role of working to keep all consumers safe, these examples represent additional workstreams which are carried out by the FSA in Northern Ireland team.

4. Progress against our priorities over the last 12 months

4.1 This section provides an update on the priorities that were identified and presented to the Board in June 2024.

4.2 Dietary health workstreams. We have continued to work with our partners in the Public Health Agency and *saferfood* to implement nutritional standards in the five Health and Social Care (HSC) Trusts and have worked with an expert group to review and update the standards. An evaluation of the implementation of the vending nutritional guidance in HSC settings was conducted by the FSA and [published](#) in September 2024, with results indicating that the vending guidance may have positively impacted nutritional purchasing with no negative impact on vending sales. More recent indications from the HSC Nutritional Standards Steering Group suggest that compliance is currently in the range of 60 – 70% within staff/visitor cafés and that 100% of products in vending machines are now compliant. Further work is underway to explore where compliance rates could be improved and as part of this, the nutritional standards co-ordinators continue to work collaboratively to support implementation. We are working on an audit tool to be used across all Trusts to ensure non-compliance issues can be identified, and support can be offered to achieve compliance.

4.3 Building on this work, we have also been shaping implementation of the vending nutritional standards in local council and public sector settings through an evaluation of three trials which have just concluded. The findings of the trials are due to be published in September 2025 and will provide useful insights and a basis for our engagement with local council representatives through the Steering Group and one-to-one meetings. A workshop in September will share the findings of the research with representatives from each of the government departments in Northern Ireland with a view to expanding the implementation of vending nutritional standards across the wider public sector.

4.4 To inform policy direction in Northern Ireland on restricting the promotion of food and drinks high in fat, sugar and salt, we have commissioned research to map the food retail landscape in Northern Ireland, looking at the location of grocery and non-grocery food retailers and area deprivation. The research is ongoing and is due to be completed by July 2025.

4.5 We continue to support food businesses to make the food environment healthier by encouraging and supporting Northern Ireland food businesses to reduce portions size, calories, saturated fat, sugar and salt in the products they make, sell or serve.

4.6 As a follow up to last year's sampling programme and [report](#) on the nutritional content of children's menus and the resulting 'Choice for Children' initiative, we commissioned a literature review to inform interventions to improve the offering of children's menus, which is due to be published shortly. We worked with the local agricultural college to develop reformulation [guidance](#)

for businesses involved in the manufacturing of ice cream, with an accompanying industry event to launch the guide.

4.7 In relation to our sampling work in partnership with local councils to determine the nutritional value of commonly consumed foods in Northern Ireland, this year work has focused on traybakes served in high street cafés. Results show that these products can be very large in size, with an average portion weighing 105g and some reaching up to 217g. The findings reflect that portion size is a significant factor in determining calorie content, as larger portions naturally contain more calories. We also commissioned research to investigate consumer perceptions of small, medium and large portion sizes of three different traybake varieties. Results indicated that less than 10% of participants preferred the largest traybakes across all traybake types, suggesting that consumers do not prefer large traybakes. The research is scheduled for publication in summer 2025.

4.8 **Food Strategy Framework.** The Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework was [published](#) in November 2024 following approval by the Northern Ireland Executive. The associated two-year action plan was published in May 2025. The Framework sets the long-term direction and presents a new whole of government approach around food to deliver better outcomes for Northern Ireland, transform the food system for future generations and help position Northern Ireland as the home of sustainable food. Although the Framework is DAERA-led, it has been developed in close collaboration with all the key players across government and wider stakeholders in Northern Ireland, including the FSA. The Framework has co-design and collaboration at its heart. Our role in the Framework in Northern Ireland also provides an important opportunity to share learnings across the UK.

4.9 **Lough Neagh.** 'Protecting Lough Neagh and the Environment' is one of the commitments in the Northern Ireland Executive's Programme for Government 2024 – 2027 which was agreed and [published](#) in February 2025. From June 2024 – February 2025, we undertook monthly sampling of fish (including eels) from Lough Neagh to establish a better baseline of levels of cyanotoxins in the fish throughout the life cycle of a blue green algal bloom. The sampling for the 2024/25 season has now been completed and is being reviewed against internal quality control procedures by one of the laboratories. The latest results will be used to inform the risk assessment for consumption of fish from the Lough and whether FSA advice requires updating. The sampling plan for 2025/26 is currently being finalised. Mid Ulster District Council, the Agri-Food and Biosciences Institute and the Lough Neagh Fisherman's Co-operative have all agreed to continue to collaborate with the FSA on next year's sampling programme. We also continue to contribute to the DAERA-led Blue-Green Algae Inter-Agency monitoring working group.

5. Delivering corporate priorities

5.1 **Work with district councils.** Our work and engagement with district councils remains a vital part of our ability to deliver on several of our corporate priorities and associated workstreams in Northern Ireland. Over the last year, the team has worked at pace with the 11 district councils to implement the new Food Standards Delivery Model which will enable district council officers to provide more targeted and proportionate support for businesses. Updates to district councils' Management Information Systems have now been completed. Currently, eight district councils are live on the system, and we expect the remaining three district councils to have completed rollout by early June.

5.2 **Official controls delivery.** In Northern Ireland, the FSA has a Service Level Agreement (SLA) in place with DAERA for the delivery of official controls and associated activities by the Department relating to meat, milk, egg and primary production hygiene in establishments registered by, or holding certain approvals from the FSA. This represents a large part of our budget (£8.2 million) and work to deliver on our core remit of keeping food and feed safe. Official

control delivery is carried out in accordance with EU Regulations and associated guidance. The quality of the service is measured throughout the year against a range of key performance indicators which are subject to annual review, and they were met to a good standard. A comprehensive review of the SLA has recently concluded and is in place for 2025-26.

5.3 Incident management. During the 2024/25 financial year, the Consumer Protection team in Northern Ireland led the investigation into 244 in country food and feed incidents. This was in addition to contributing to a broad range of UK-wide incidents which were led by the central Incidents team. The team in Northern Ireland worked collaboratively with counterparts in England, Wales and Scotland, district councils, other government departments and interested stakeholders in Northern Ireland to ensure that unsafe product that had reached Northern Ireland was removed from the market. The team also worked closely with partners in the Republic of Ireland and EU Member States and third countries to investigate international food and feed safety issues.

5.4 Bread and Flour Review. Alongside officials in Wales, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and Food Standards Scotland, we carried out the four-nation review of the Bread and Flour Regulations, delivering new Northern Ireland legislation. 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. The review has also involved close working with the Department of Health in Northern Ireland, 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 fetuses. This was coordinated as part of the wider review, with the Regulations being used as a legislative vehicle for the implementation of folic acid policy. The [Bread and Flour \(Amendment\) Regulations \(Northern Ireland\) 2024](#) were made in November 2024 and guidance for industry and enforcement authorities has also been published.

5.5 Alongside the areas highlighted, we are closely linked into priority workstreams across the FSA to ensure that Northern Ireland considerations are considered, including Market Authorisation reform, recycled plastic food contact materials and the Cell Cultivated Products sandbox programme.

6. Forward look

6.1 We continue to deliver the FSA business plan priorities in Northern Ireland and work closely with colleagues in Wales and England to deliver these programmes. We also flex our resources to deliver Northern Ireland specific priorities, and the following areas will be a specific focus for the team in Northern Ireland over the next six – 12 months:

6.2 Future legislative programme. Over the next six – 12 months, we will continue to move forward with our agreed legislative programme. It has been prioritised in line with those pieces which will have the highest impact as well as recognising our obligations to implement EU law in Annex 2 of the Windsor Framework.

6.3 In 2025 we aim to make Miscellaneous **Amendments** (enforcement of EU requirements on vitamins and minerals and on Total Diet Replacement, plus additional corrections and clarifications) and Breakfast **Directives** (transposition of new EU requirements for honey, jam and similar products, fruit juice, and dehydrated milk). Furthermore, we will proceed with consultations and initiating the legislative process for the following other pieces of legislation:

- **Food Contact Materials**– Updates to references to EU legislation in existing domestic legislation, ensuring effective enforcement of EU requirements on recycled plastic food

contact materials.

- **Contaminants**– Consolidation of Contaminants in Food Regulations to execute and enforce new EU Contaminants Regulation.
- **Official Controls**– Westminster Statutory Instrument to execute and enforce EU official controls requirements.
- **FHRS Online Display**– Introduction of mandatory online display of Food Hygiene Ratings. This proposal has been subject to public consultation and stakeholder engagement and was previously asked for by the Northern Ireland Assembly Committee for Health during the passage of the Food Hygiene Rating Act (Northern Ireland) 2016.

6.4 Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework. As the Framework moves to delivery stages and implementation of the associated action plan, we will continue to work with colleagues across government and stakeholders in Northern Ireland. The FSA is a named delivery partner for the Framework under Mission One: *To use food to improve lifelong health and wellbeing*. In the next 12 months, this includes the publication of the literature review to inform interventions to improve the offering of children's menus and the evaluation of the implementation of nutritional standards for vending in public sector and local council settings.

6.5 Dietary health. In addition to the areas noted in 6.4, we will continue to focus on the implementation of nutritional standards in local council and public sector settings and the development of policy options on the promotion and placement of less healthy food and drink. We are also contributing to the development of the new Department of Health-led Obesity Strategy – Healthy Futures. The FSA will be a named delivery partner for the industry focused outcomes, supporting Northern Ireland food businesses to make the food environment healthier through reducing calories, saturated fat, sugar and salt in the food they produce, sell or serve, reducing portion size and providing nutritional information. Our role in the Strategy will be complimentary and focused on the work we will be undertaking in relation to nutritional standards and promotions.

7. Conclusions

7.1 This paper provides a high-level overview of work that has been undertaken since the last update to the Board in June 2024 as well as current and future priorities for the FSA team in Northern Ireland.

7.2 Overall, the Board is asked to:

- **assess the** effectiveness of the work in Northern Ireland to deliver FSA priorities
- **consider the** alignment of this work with the FSA's strategic direction; and
- **provide feedback** on the identified priorities.