

Report from the Chair of the Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee

FSA 25-12-09 - 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 for the period from December 2024 to November 2025.

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

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

2. Role and Membership

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 any specific Northern Ireland elements linked to the remit of the FSA, as defined in the Act.

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

2.3 The Committee has a complement of eight members, one of whom is also the FSA Board Member for Northern Ireland and NIFAC Chair. All members are recruited through open public appointment competition and are appointed by the Minister of Health in Northern Ireland.

2.4 NIFAC members provide a wide range of expertise, experience and practical knowledge to the FSA. Biographies of current NIFAC members can be found [here](#). This wide-ranging experience as well as members' associated networks and experience has been valuable for NIFAC discussions.

2.5 During the reporting period, one NIFAC member finished their term of appointment, and one member joined the Committee. NIFAC members wish to put their thanks on record for the work of Greg Irwin, including the insight and expertise he brought. David Torrens started his first term of appointment on 1 April 2025.

3. Committee Meetings and Engagement

3.1 Since the last report to the Board, four NIFAC themed meetings have taken place. Themed meetings are focused on a particular area or theme and provide the Committee

with an opportunity to consider topics from a country specific perspective. Themed meetings allow NIFAC to gain a fuller understanding of pertinent issues, enabling the Committee to more actively feed into FSA priorities.

3.2 As part of this, the Committee invites in relevant experts from the FSA, as well as external stakeholders, to present and discuss the themes from a Northern Ireland perspective.

3.3 As far as is practicable, themes for NIFAC meetings are aligned with the Welsh Food Advisory Committee (WFAC). However, there are occasions, as shown from some of the themes NIFAC has explored this year, where they may be nation specific. I continue to work closely with the Board member for Wales and Chair of WFAC, Dr Rhian Hayward, to ensure that the Committees are operating in the most efficient and effective way and they are best placed to provide country specific advice. Both Chairs and Committee teams also work closely to develop forward plans and horizon scan.

3.4 Over the last year, NIFAC has explored the following themes and issues:

3.5 **February 2025: The Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework** – NIFAC undertook a deep dive of the [Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework](#). Although the Framework is led by the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA), it has been developed in close collaboration with all the key partners across government and wider stakeholders in Northern Ireland, including the FSA. The Committee heard from the Framework leads from DAERA and explored each of the priorities contained within the Framework. To provide FSA context, the Dietary Health team presented on the FSA's involvement in the development of the Framework, noting how the Dietary Health priorities interact with the Framework. David Holmes, FSA Deputy Director of Strategy, also provided the Committee with an overview of the work that the Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs is undertaking in the development of a new National Food Strategy.

3.6 Discussions were then focused on the next steps for the Framework, including the associated [action plan](#), which the FSA is a named delivery partner in. Members discussed how progress will be measured, how it will be reported and the importance of the FSA's role and contributions moving forward. Overall, the Committee emphasised the importance of the priorities and missions identified, noting that a holistic and joined up approach from all departments and stakeholders involved is key to delivery.

3.7 **April 2025: Cell Cultivated Products Sandbox** – With the launch of the [sandbox](#), the April meeting was dedicated to Cell Cultivated Products (CCPs). The Committee benefitted from expert presentations from the FSA Chief Scientific Adviser and members of the CCP sandbox team. The meeting explored several key aspects of CCPs, including: the scientific foundations of cell cultivation technology; the vision, scope and deliverables of the sandbox initiatives; workshop findings and collaborative networks; the four-nation regulatory framework approach and Northern Ireland specific considerations. The sandbox team emphasised that safety remains the paramount priority throughout this work, a principle that featured prominently in Committee deliberations. Other key discussion areas included the importance of building and maintaining consumer confidence, and the need for clear, informative labelling. In relation to Northern Ireland specifically, members raised the nature of Northern Ireland's agricultural sector and welcomed the inclusion of Northern Ireland departments in the cross-government network. Members noted their interest in this work and requested updates as the sandbox work progresses.

3.8 **July 2025: Operational Delivery and Horizon Scanning** – The Committee was joined by a range of colleagues from the FSA to look at Operational Delivery and Horizon Scanning, with a focus on the Windsor Framework and sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS)-related issues. The aim of this session was to enable members to understand more about the topics and measures. The presentations explored a range of topics, including import roles and responsibilities, infrastructure, the Northern Ireland Retail Movement Scheme and the Common Understanding text issued after

the UK-EU Summit. As part of this meeting, members were presented with a number of scenarios to discuss and respond to, and this provided members with an opportunity to see the complexities associated with the work and to understand more about the practical outworkings. During discussions, members explored key trade concepts to better understand the logistical challenges involved, commending the team for their efforts. Given the complexity of the subject matter, members noted they found it refreshing and valuable to engage in the exercises and being able to apply the information presented to specific scenarios.

3.9 October 2025: Local Authority Engagement – Building on the engagement with district councils last year, the Committee welcomed representatives from across district councils in Northern Ireland. The Committee received six presentations from district council representatives, covering: the Food Standards Delivery Model; prosecutions; sampling; incidents; food safety during events and imported food controls. The meeting offered a comprehensive overview of the work being done by district councils to protect public health and ensure that food is safe and what it says it is. The wide-ranging topics covered provided an important overview of the breadth of work that district councils are involved in, including the areas of engagement and work with the FSA. This provided helpful background for members and will aid in NIFAC's future consideration of FSA policy development. The Committee is keen to ensure that this annual engagement continues and sees it as an important opportunity to hear directly from district councils and to build relationships.

3.10 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.

3.11 In June, we held a joint online Board preparation meeting with WFAC. This provided NIFAC and WFAC members an opportunity to hear and understand more about the country specific considerations and comments on the papers from each Committee. Members provided positive feedback on the joint meeting, and we plan to replicate it to help build relationships.

3.12 As well as meetings, the Committee and I have had the opportunity to engage with a range of stakeholders throughout the year. This has included events such as the Balmoral Show in May and the launch of the Annual Report on Food Standards in June. The Committee and I were also pleased to welcome the Board to Northern Ireland in September and appreciated the opportunity to meet with Board members.

4. Forward Look

4.1 Members are keen to ensure that they are considering areas which are prevalent or an emerging issue for the FSA at that time. I will continue to engage with the FSA Chair, WFAC Chair and Executive Management team to help identify issues and areas where the Committees can add value.

4.2 While we will flex the forward work plan as required, the Committee plans to explore the following areas during 2026. Where possible, each theme will be linked to a relevant visit. The team and I are currently exploring possible visit venues.

4.3 Science and Surveillance – NIFAC is keen to explore the work in relation to science and surveillance in Northern Ireland and how it informs policy development. This will include looking at the management of Northern Ireland National Reference Laboratory contracts, surveillance and reporting of antimicrobial resistance in *Escherichia coli* in retail meats and the work of the team on the four nations monitoring group for folic acid fortification.

4.4 **Lough Neagh** – With the onset of a significant algal bloom in Lough Neagh in Northern Ireland during summer 2023, the FSA commenced a sampling programme and have continued to monitor the levels of cyanotoxins in fish in Lough Neagh to inform risk management advice. As this area is specific for the FSA in Northern Ireland, it would be useful for NIFAC to explore this issue and understand more about the sampling which is being undertaken.

4.5 **Dietary Health** – Given the FSA's additional remit responsibilities in Northern Ireland in relation to dietary health, NIFAC members hope to look at the current work in this space, including research which is being undertaken. Part of this will be to understand how the priorities feed into wider Northern Ireland Executive priorities, including the Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework.

4.6 Other themes the Committee is keen to explore include a meeting with a consumer focus to meet with relevant consumer facing organisations and stakeholders in Northern Ireland, as well as considering the role of producers and suppliers in Northern Ireland to build a wider picture of the food landscape. We also aim to continuing building on the engagement with district councils through another local authority focused meeting.

4.7 Discussions are currently underway about holding a joint meeting with WFAC in 2026. Members from both NIFAC and WFAC welcomed the opportunity to hold a Board preparation meeting together and myself and the WFAC Chair are keen to build on this.

4.8 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.

5. Conclusions

5.1 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.

5.2 The Committee will take 2026 as an opportunity to continue to engage with a wide range of stakeholders in Northern Ireland and seek to build the relationship between NIFAC and WFAC.

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