

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Minutes of the Themed Meeting on Wednesday 15th October 2025

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Meeting on Wednesday 15th October 2025 at Food Standards Agency, Belfast, 10 Clarendon Road, Belfast, BT1 3BG

NIFAC Members

- Anthony Harbinson – Chair
- Ciaran McCartan – NIFAC Member
- Judith Hanvey – NIFAC Member
- Cathal McDonnell – NIFAC Member
- David Torrens – NIFAC Member
- Dr Michael Johnston – NIFAC Member

Local Authority Representatives

- Christina McErlean – Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council
- Colin Kelly – Antrim and Newtownabbey Borough Council
- Joy Lyness – Ards and North Down Borough Council
- Monica McDowell – Mid Ulster District Council
- Graham Farthing – Newry, Mourne and Down District Council
- David Coon – Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council
- Elaine Thompson – Mid and East Antrim Borough Council

FSA Officials

- Andy Cole – Director for Northern Ireland
- Anjali Juneja – Director of UK and International Affairs
- Firth Piracha – Head of EU Relations, Trade and Legislation
- Roberta Ferson – Head of Corporate Services and Strategic Engagement
- Sharon Gilmore – Head of Standards and Dietary Health
- Ruth Watson – Head of Audit, Business Support, Assembly Liaison and Comms
- Jayne McGlaughlin – Senior Adviser – Assembly Liaison
- Michaela Dobbin – Assembly Liaison Adviser
- Louise Connolly – Local Authority Policy and Delivery Lead
- Craig Leeman – Head of Consumer Protection
- Keith Young – Fraud Assistant
- Mark O'Neill – Head of Trade Imports and Exports
- Adam McDowell – Food Standards Reform Lead
- Naomi Davidson – Head of Science and Surveillance

Apologies

- Dr Janice McConnell – NIFAC Member
- Dr Lynne McMullan – NIFAC Member
- Philip Kennedy – Head of Food Safety Policy and Delivery

1. Welcome and Introductions

1.1 The Chair invited NIFAC Members, district council representatives and FSA officials to the meeting, and expressed thanks to district councils for their help in organising the agenda.

2. Declarations of Interest

2.1 The Chair invited Members to declare any interests. No interests were declared.

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting on 1 July 2025

3.1 The Chair asked if there were any comments on the minutes of the previous NIFAC meeting held on 1 July 2025.

3.2 Members agreed the minutes as an accurate record of the meeting.

4. Directors' Update

4.1 The Chair invited both Anjali Juneja and Andy Cole to deliver the Directors' Update.

4.2 Anjali reflected on the success of the Board visit to Belfast in September and highlighted the strong stakeholder relationships in the region, particularly at Ministerial level, which continues to be a valuable asset to the FSA.

4.3 She reflected that during the visit the FSA Chair and Chief Executive also met with counterparts from the Food Safety Authority of Ireland to discuss joint areas of interest, recognising the importance of joint working across the island of Ireland. Board and EMT members visited key sites including Queen's University Belfast, a feed mill, and the Belfast SPS Inspection Facility.

4.4 Anjali updated NIFAC on the latest risk assessment findings, noting the advice that slush-ice drinks containing glycerol are not suitable for children under seven, and that those aged seven to 10 should have no more than one 350ml serving per day. She highlighted that the FSA is working with retailers and local district councils to support implementation, and the measures will be evaluated over the coming months.

4.5 Andy provided an update on recent areas of work for the Northern Ireland Directorate, including ongoing monitoring at Lough Neagh, and progress in dietary health work, such as the upcoming Northern Ireland Obesity Strategy, the Vending Nutritional Standards pilot scheme, and the publication of the National Diet and Nutrition Survey.

4.6 Members asked for future information about the Retail Intelligence Survey which had been highlighted in the Report. The NIFAC Secretariat took an action to provide future information to the Committee in relation to this.

5. Chair's Update

5.1 The Chair provided an update on the Board retreat to London and noted that the next FSA Board meeting is scheduled for December.

5.2 The Chair informed the Committee that his tenure has been extended for a further three years until March 2028.

6. Presentation from Christina McErlean – Food Standards Delivery Model

6.1 The Chair invited Christina to deliver her presentation.

6.2 Christina McErlean (Belfast City Council) presented on the Food Standards Delivery Model (FSDM), outlining the aims of the new FSDM, how it works, its development, stages of implementation, the challenges encountered during implementation, and future considerations.

6.3 Christina highlighted the collaborative working that had been undertaken with the FSA throughout the development of the model.

6.4 District council representatives emphasised that Northern Ireland is ahead of the curve compared to Local Authorities in Great Britain, with all 11 district councils working under the new FSDM. The Committee commended all district councils for their work and commitment to implementing the new model.

6.5 Overall members highlighted that they were impressed with the work undertaken by district councils and welcomed the progress made.

7. Presentation from Joy Lyness – Prosecutions

7.1 The Chair invited Joy to deliver her presentation.

7.2 Joy Lyness (Ards and North Down District Council) presented a case study in relation to a successful prosecution case on a takeaway that failed to comply with the legal requirements of the Food Hygiene Rating Scheme (FHRs). Breaches included the failure to display the correct FHRs rating and failure to register the business when it changed ownership.

7.3 Joy walked the Committee through the different stages of the prosecution, highlighting the different impacting factors and final outcome.

7.4 The Committee noted how labour-intensive it is to pursue a case to prosecution and discussed whether the current level of fines are an effective deterrent. Members also discussed the differences in enforcement approaches across the UK and assured district councils that the FSA will support communications around prosecution cases when district councils choose to publicise the cases.

8. Presentation from Monica McDonnell – Sampling

8.1 The Chair invited Monica to deliver her presentation.

8.2 Monica McDonnell (Mid Ulster District Council) provided an overview of the district council sampling programme, including the legislative landscape, types of testing, and specific sampling programmes. She explained how the results inform future sampling priorities and resource targeting, noting that the rising cost of analysis and limited availability of suitable testing facilities present ongoing challenges.

8.3 There was a discussion about maximising the use of the UK Food Surveillance System, with district councils advocating for further investment to realise the system's full potential. The Committee discussed the sampling regime and if sampling results have an impact on what is sampled moving forward. District council representatives noted that as much as possible, sampling results are used to drive further investigations, and they will always keep these in mind

when developing sampling priorities.

8.4 Representatives highlighted that ready to eat foods are normally a priority given preparation practice (e.g. sandwich fillers/coleslaw/pre-prepared salads etc). They also emphasised that it is a constant piece of work to develop priorities for sampling. For example, in Q4 there will be a focus on Nitrates/Nitrites as the Regulations have recently changed.

9. Presentation from Graham Farthing – Incidents

9.1 The Chair invited Graham to deliver his presentation.

9.2 Graham Farthing (Newry, Mourne and Down District Council) discussed a recent whistleblowing incident concerning food hygiene practices at a premises in Northern Ireland. Graham provided an overview of the incident and investigation, linking with other government departments, the seizure of product and the key learning outcomes identified.

9.3 Members discussed the scale of the incident and the joint working between the district council, DAERA and the FSA.

10. Presentation from David Coon – Food Safety During Events

10.1 The Chair invited David to deliver his presentation.

10.2 David Coon (Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council) delivered a presentation on food safety during events, covering the preparation required, key areas of focus, and challenges encountered during previous major events. He outlined how Environmental Health Officers (EHOs) address these challenges to ensure food safety standards are maintained throughout. He provided real life examples that his team has been involved in, including the 153rd Open Championship in Portrush this summer.

10.3 During discussions, members asked how EHOs manage situations where unlicensed FBOs arrive unexpectedly on the day of an event. David explained EHOs would work in teams to identify unregistered operators and plan staffing levels in advance to ensure sufficient coverage.

10.4 Members noted that the presentation showcased the range of activities that EHOs undertake to keep consumers safe. The Committee agreed that it was interesting to hear a recent case study of this work.

11. Presentation from Elaine Thompson – Imported Food Controls

11.1 The Chair invited Elaine to deliver her presentation.

11.2 Elaine Thompson (Mid and East Antrim Borough Council) provided a detailed overview of council responsibilities at Northern Ireland's four Product Inspection Facilities, highlighting the range of official controls managed by district councils.

11.3 She outlined the collaborative work required with delivery partners including DAERA, other councils, and Border Force. It was noted that in 2024, Northern Ireland had the second highest number of checks in Europe, just coming in after France.

11.4 Members discussed the significant amount of work involved in establishing the inspection facilities, including staffing challenges and the need for multi-year budgets to support job security and longer-term workforce planning.

11.5 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.

11.6 The Committee agreed that this provided helpful background for members and will aid in NIFAC's future consideration of FSA policy development.

12. AOB

12.1 The Chair invited district councils to identify any additional support the Committee could provide to assist them in fulfilling their statutory responsibilities for food safety and enforcement. He acknowledged that there is a healthy co-operation between the FSA and district councils and reiterated the Committee's appreciation for their ongoing collaboration and recognised the pressures they continue to manage.

12.2 District councils representatives raised the frequency of audits in Northern Ireland compared to their counterparts in Great Britain, noting that audits require significant resource. FSA officials provided background in relation to this but agreed to provide further information to the Committee.

12.3 The Committee is keen to ensure that this annual engagement with district councils continues and sees it as an important opportunity to hear directly from district councils and to build relationships.

12.4 The Chair advised that the next NIFAC meeting will take place on 1 December 2025.