

Report from the Chair of the Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee- 7th December 2022

FSA-22-12-09 - 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 from the period September 2021 to November 2022.

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

2. Introduction

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 food safety and standards issues, with particular emphasis on Northern Ireland.

2.2 NIFAC members provide a wide range of expertise, experience and practical knowledge of the FSA. All members are recruited through open Public Appointment style competition and are appointed by the Minister of Health in Northern Ireland.

2.3 The Committee works closely with the FSA both in Northern Ireland and beyond and supports the FSA's strategic outcomes.

2.4 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.

3. Committee Membership

3.1 The Committee has 8 members, 1 of whom is also the FSA Board member for Northern Ireland and NIFAC Chair. From 1 September, NIFAC has also been joined by the FSA's Boardroom Apprentice for 2022-2023, Judith Hanvey.

3.2 There is a wide range of expertise among the NIFAC membership, including members with backgrounds in farming and agriculture; education; communications; industry; research and policy; and environmental health. This wide-ranging experience as well as members' associated networks and insights has been extremely useful for NIFAC discussions.

3.3 The previous Board member for Northern Ireland and Chair of NIFAC, Colm McKenna, finished his term of appointment on 31 August 2022. The Committee wishes to put its thanks on record for the work that Colm did during his tenure and the insight and experience that he brought.

3.4 Given the change of Chair in the reporting period, this paper reflects on NIFAC activity under both Chairs.

3.5 One Committee member, Fiona Hanna, is due to come to the end of her second term of appointment on 1 August 2023. The NIFAC Secretariat will be working to develop the Public Appointment exercise for a new Committee member in the coming months.

4. Committee Meetings

4.1 Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, NIFAC meetings took place virtually. Over the course of 2022, in person meetings themed meetings have resumed.

4.2 Each theme, guided by the Chair, has provided the Committee with the opportunity to consider issues from a country specific perspective, enabling discussion and consideration of a number of relevant themes and matters.

4.3 Following the appointment of four new Committee members in 2021, this has also been an opportunity for NIFAC to hear from teams across the FSA in Northern Ireland about their work areas.

4.4 Over the last year, the Committee has considered the following themes:

- **Strategy.** Across the course of two themed meetings, NIFAC considered the development of the FSA's new strategy, specifically from a Northern Ireland perspective. In October 2021, NIFAC was joined by the Chair and Chief Executive to discuss the development of the new strategy and took the opportunity to provide feedback on the plans. In January 2022, NIFAC continued this discussion with the FSA's Strategy Unit. The Committee welcomed the timing of the strategy and agreed that it was an important time to refresh and were specifically impressed with the adoption of a three-country approach by default.

- **Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework.** While considering the new FSA strategy, NIFAC also took the opportunity to receive an update about the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) led Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework. Although this work is led by DAERA, it is being developed collaboratively with officials across Departments in Northern Ireland. Over the course of development, the Programme Manager has attended a number of NIFAC meetings to update on progress and the Committee looks forward to continuing this engagement.

- **Meat Hygiene Delivery.** As part of NIFAC's consideration of work areas across the FSA in Northern Ireland this year, the Committee held a session with the Operational Policy and Delivery Team. The aim of this discussion was to enable NIFAC to understand more about this business area. The Committee heard from the team about the Service Level Agreement 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. The Committee found it beneficial to consider this business area in more detail and commended the team for the work that they do to ensure that food is safe.

- **Dietary Health and new Obesity Strategy.** With the FSA in Northern Ireland's role in the development of the new Obesity Strategy, the Committee used its meeting in April 2022 to look at and consider the Dietary Health remit of the FSA in Northern Ireland. NIFAC also heard from

Gary Maxwell from the Department of Health who presented on the Obesity Strategy Project 2023 – 2032. The Committee had an in depth discussion around cross-government collaboration and commitment in working towards tackling obesity.

· **Incidents.** In June 2022 NIFAC considered incident handling and resilience in the FSA. NIFAC heard from Incidents Teams, both in Northern Ireland and England, and received an overview of the incident handling process, focussing on associated risks and emerging trends. The Committee was especially interested in changes post EU Exit and the new processes in place.

· **Engagement with Lakeland Dairies.** In November 2022, the Committee held a meeting a Lakeland Dairies, which is a major dairy processing co-operative. NIFAC heard from Lakeland Dairies about their business model, the innovative technologies used, and product innovation based around reformulation. The Committee then had an opportunity to undertake a tour of the facilities and understand more about their processes. This was a very positive visit and NIFAC looks forward to continuing this type of engagement.

4.5 NIFAC has also continued to meet virtually to consider papers ahead of each Board meeting. This has allowed members to consider the published Board papers and a provide a devolved perspective, enabling the Chair to feedback Committee comments during Board meetings.

5. Forward Look

5.1 The Committee is currently developing a forward work programme for 2023. Areas which NIFAC is planning to consider over the coming year include: The Retained EU Law (Revocation and Reform) Bill; Borders Target Operating Model; Cost of Living; and Precision Breeding, with a focus on consumer research.

5.2 The agendas for NIFAC meetings will also continue to take the issues being discussed by the Board into consideration, with particular attention to any areas that may have a special relevance to Northern Ireland.

5.3 The Committee will also consider any priorities set by a new Northern Ireland Executive, including a Programme for Government, and where appropriate, consider any themes relevant to the FSA in Northern Ireland.

5.4 As part of the forward work programme, the Committee also intends to increase stakeholder engagement and where possible, seek opportunities to meet with stakeholders across the remit of the FSA in Northern Ireland.

5.5 This will include hosting meetings and visits across Northern Ireland to bolster the visibility of NIFAC. The Committee intends to replicate the format of the meeting and engagement with Lakeland Dairies for themed meetings throughout 2023.

5.6 NIFAC also looks forward to engaging with the Board during the planned visit to Belfast in June 2023. This will be an opportunity for the Committee to engage with the Board and Executive Management Team, discuss areas of mutual interest and build relationships between NIFAC and the Board.

5.7 The Committee is cognisant of the [Board Effectiveness Review](#) and associated Working Group responses to the recommendations. NIFAC will work alongside the Chair and Director responsible for Northern Ireland to understand how the value of NIFAC can be further enhanced and utilised.

6. Conclusions

6.1 NIFAC has considered a wide variety of themes over the last 12 months and has appreciated the input from colleagues both within in the FSA and those externally.

6.2 The Committee will take 2023 as an opportunity to engage with stakeholders in Northern Ireland and seek to visit relevant sites.

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

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