

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Minutes of the Themed Meeting on Tuesday 23rd April 2024

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NIFAC Members?

- Anthony Harbinson – Chair
- Judith Hanvey – NIFAC Member
- Greg Irwin?– NIFAC Member
- Ciaran McCartan?– NIFAC Member
- Janice McConnell – NIFAC Member
- Cathal McDonnell?– NIFAC Member
- Mike Johnston – NIFAC Member (remotely)
- Lynne McMullan – NIFAC Member (remotely)

FSA Officials

- Kathryn Baker – Head of Food Safety Policy and Delivery
- Roberta Ferson – Head of Corporate Services and Strategic Engagement
- Sharon Gilmore – Head of Standards and Dietary Health
- Firth Piracha – Head of EU Relations, Trade and Legislation (remotely)
- Jayne McGlaughlin – Senior Advisor – Assembly Liaison

Observers

- Tom Symington (Communications Intern)
- Annie Chambers (Senior Advisor – Legislation)
- David Torrens (Remotely)

Apologies

- Andy Cole – Director for Northern Ireland
- Anjali Juneja – Director of UK and International Affairs
- Ruth Watson – Head of Audit, Business Support, Assembly Liaison and Communications

1. Welcome and Housekeeping

1.1 The Chair welcomed all NIFAC members, FSA officials and presenters to the meeting.

1.2 The Chair noted that this was the first NIFAC meeting for three new Committee members – Judith, Janice and Mike – and asked them to introduce themselves. There was a roundtable of introductions.

1.3 The Chair thanked Cathal and Deli Lites for hosting and also Ciaran for agreeing to present on the theme of the meeting: The food business landscape in Northern Ireland and factors which may impact innovation and growth.

2. Declarations of Interest

2.1 The Chair asked if members had any interests to declare. No interests were declared.

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting on 31st January 2024

3.1 The Chair asked if there were any comments on the minutes of the previous NIFAC meeting held on 31st January 2024.

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

4. Director and Chair Updates

4.1 The Chair provided an update on the FSA Board meeting in March which took place in Leeds. He confirmed that he fed in the views of NIFAC on all of the papers, especially in relation to Regulated Product Reform, including the areas which NIFAC discussed at the themed meeting in January.

4.2 The Chair also noted that there was a good discussion in relation to Precision Breeding and NIFAC views were appreciated.

4.3 He advised that the next Board meeting is due to take place in Wales in June.

4.4 In relation to the Director's update, the Chair advised that Andy had sent his apologies for the meeting, but members had received the report and members of the Senior Management Team were available to answer any questions.

4.5 Members agreed that the report was an excellent overview of the work of the team in Northern Ireland in the last three months and wanted to put their thanks on record for the work that the team has been and continues to do.

4.6 Specifically, members mentioned the span of stakeholder engagement and the work that is being done in this area. Additionally, the Committee discussed the return of the Northern Ireland Executive and the impact on the operating environment.

5. Presentation from Deli Lites

5.1 The Chair invited Cathal McDonnell to deliver his presentation to the Committee.

5.2 Cathal provided the Committee with an overview of the business, specifically looking at the areas that Deli Lites is focused on in relation to innovation. He informed the Committee that the company's purpose is 'to sustain people and the planet.'

5.3 During the presentation, Cathal identified six areas that may impact innovation and growth: affordability; sustainability; political uncertainty; health; occasion and convenience. The main takeaways from each of these were:

- Affordability – In order for businesses to reduce costs, the manufacturing sector is investing heavily in automation and robotics.
- Sustainability – Deli Lites has a real focus on sustainability, which is emphasised by their [B Corp Certification](#). They are currently the only B Corp certified sandwich maker in the world. Cathal highlighted that many businesses are now looking at eco scoring to inform consumers about the environmental impact of a product. This was an area that was discussed in detail by the Committee, including consumer perceptions.
- Political uncertainty – Discussions around the impact of the Windsor Framework for businesses.
- Health – Cathal noted that many new products are being created to contain levels of protein that allow for claims to be made. However, he did note that while they always strive for high quality products, they are often seen as treats and therefore do not put as much emphasis on the levels of fats and sugars.
- Occasion – Deli Lites trends show that more people are eating out of home for breakfast in addition to lunch and dinner which has an impact on the innovation required in the business to develop such products.

5.4 A key element of innovation for the company is also in relation to product development. Deli Lites has a Head of Food Innovation and Development who engages with businesses to develop specific products to suit their needs. Cathal noted that this is key for their business – to ensure that products are always evolving.

5.5 Members agreed that for the majority of businesses in Northern Ireland, the six areas that Cathal identified will likely be the main areas that impact innovation and growth in the coming years.

5.6 In relation to Committee discussions, members were interested in current staffing levels and asked if EU Exit had had an impact on resource. Cathal confirmed that all staffing requirements are currently met and there are a lot of Europeans working in the business, although this is sometimes seasonal.

5.7 NIFAC discussed nutrition and if nutritional values were a big driver for those purchasing from Deli Lites. Cathal noted that some companies will set their own criteria when they go out to tender, and this will have to be met. Larger companies will also have auditing teams who visit the factory to ensure that standards are being met.

5.8 Furthermore, the Committee considered the impact of "internet trends" and how even food businesses are having to try and keep up with trends that are developing on online platforms.

6. Presentation from Invest NI

6.1 The Chair invited Ciaran to deliver his presentation to the Committee.

6.2 Ciaran provided an overview of the work of Invest NI, especially in relation to the work that he does as an Innovation Advisor. He advised that he works primarily with the SME sector in Northern Ireland.

6.3 Ciaran noted that Northern Ireland is an SME economy. However, many businesses struggle to get from the kitchen to something bigger – there are a number of micro-SMEs who are trying to make products in a small kitchen, and it is difficult to move beyond this.

6.4 Considering the issues that impact innovation and growth, Ciaran emphasised that Invest NI are finding that many businesses face the same barriers to innovation and growth that Cathal highlighted. In addition, Ciaran informed the Committee that labour constraints and staff retention are currently a huge issue for the food sector.

6.5 Overall Ciaran highlighted the following issues that the sector is facing:

- Labour constraints and staff retention
- Supply chain disruptions
- Reduction of waste and the move towards net zero
- Improving productivity, embracing automation
- Retailer and consumer demands
- Input costs, margins and the cost-of-living crisis
- Capital investment costs and interest rates
- Time.

6.6 The Committee discussed the importance of the DAERA-led Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework, which Invest NI is also involved in. Members agreed that the Framework will be key moving forward, given that it has been developed with a whole systems approach.

6.7 Members also observed the impact that outside factors can have – including seasonality of produce, supply chain disruptions and customer demands.

7. Tour of Deli Lites

7.1 Following the presentations, members undertook a tour of the Deli Lites production facilities. The Committee was extremely impressed with the sandwich production, including the number of products that were being produced and labelled for different companies at the same time.

8. AOB

8.1 The Chair confirmed that the next NIFAC meeting is due to take place on 12th June.