

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Minutes of the Themed Meeting on Friday 7th February 2025

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Meeting on Friday 7th February 2025 at Food Standards Agency, Belfast, 10 Clarendon Road, Belfast, BT1 3BG

NIFAC Members?

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

Presenters

- Joy Alexander – Deputy Director of Sustainable Agri-Food Development Division (DAERA)
- Fiona Ferguson – Food Strategy Policy (DAERA)
- Jennifer McGonagle – FSA Dietary Health Lead in Northern Ireland
- David Holmes – FSA Deputy Director of Strategy (remotely)

FSA Officials

- Anjali Juneja – Director of UK and International Affairs (remotely)
- Andy Cole – Director for Northern Ireland
- Philip Kennedy – 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)
- Ruth Watson – Head of Audit, Business Support, Assembly Liaison and Communications
- Jayne McGlaughlin – Senior Adviser – Assembly Liaison
- Jamie Young – NIFAC Secretariat

Observers

- Adam McDowell – Food Standards Reform Lead
- Aoibheann Dunne – Head of Science and Surveillance
- David Torrens – (remotely)
- Aoibheann Swail – Nutrition Science Adviser (remotely)

- Amanda Brobyn – Communications Manager (remotely)
- Daniel Sproule – Senior Nutrition Policy Adviser (remotely)

1. Welcome and Housekeeping

- 1.1. The Chair welcomed all NIFAC members, FSA officials and presenters to the meeting.
- 1.2. The Chair thanked the external attendees from DAERA for agreeing to attend and present.

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 18th October 2024

- 3.1 The Chair asked if there were any comments on the minutes of the previous NIFAC meeting held on 18th October 2024.
- 3.2 Members agreed the minutes as an accurate record of the meeting.

4. Directors' Updates

- 4.1 The Chair invited both Anjali and Andy to deliver the Directors' Update.
- 4.2 Anjali highlighted that since the last update to the Committee, it has been confirmed that Professor Susan Jebb has been reappointed for a further term until 31st December 2027. She also noted that Katie Pettifer had recently been appointed as the new Chief Executive.
- 4.3 Anjali noted that business planning is currently taking place across the organisation and was a priority area of focus for the Executive Management Team. She also touched on the UK Government Spending Review, as it continues to form a major part of the wider organisation's work at this time. She confirmed that the Northern Ireland draft budget is out for consultation at present.
- 4.4 Andy noted that it had been a very busy period, and the report provides a high-level overview of the variety of issues that the team in Northern Ireland has been dealing with.
- 4.5 He highlighted to the Committee that The Bread and Flour (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2024 had been made in Northern Ireland, noting that this represented a significant amount of work and a real example of four-nation working. He also noted the continuing work in relation to Lough Neagh, incidents and the numerous dietary health workstreams.

5. Chair's Update

- 5.1 The Chair welcomed the appointment of Professor Susan Jebb for another term, as well as the appointment of Katie Pettifer as Chief Executive.
- 5.2 In relation to Board activity, the Chair noted that he had reflected the views and questions from the Committee at the December Board meeting. He highlighted that the Board discussed the annual paper from NIFAC and confirmed that there were positive conversations in relation to the paper, with the Board being particularly interested in the forward plans.
- 5.3 The Chair noted that a recruitment campaign was underway for new members for the FSA Board, with the possibility of 5–7 new members being recruited.

5.4 Furthermore, the Chair advised the Committee that since the last NIFAC meeting he attended the Board retreat in January. He highlighted that this was a strategic meeting where the Board identified and discussed a range of issues and areas that they are going to take forward and he will include NIFAC in the discussions.

5.5 Looking ahead, the Chair noted that he will be working with the NIFAC Secretariat team to confirm forward plans for the Committee in 2025, including visits and stakeholder engagements.

6. Presentation from Joy Alexander – The Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework – The Story So Far

6.1 The Chair invited Joy Alexander to deliver her presentation. The presentation from Joy provided background on the Framework, focused around where we've been, where we are and where we're going.

6.2 Joy explained the background of the Framework to the Committee, noting that decisions in relation to food have a huge impact upon the economy, health and the environment. Furthermore, she explored the background to Framework development, including strategic insight workshops which took place in 2019 and a further review lab in 2023.

6.3 Joy explained that the aim of the Framework was to be a cross-government unifying Framework with a long-term vision to guide long term decision making around food. The Framework is led by DAERA but has been developed in collaboration with all the key players across government and wider stakeholders in Northern Ireland, including the FSA. She emphasised that a food system and strategic collaboration approach was taken to design the Framework.

6.4 The current version of the vision is:

"A transformed innovative food system that protects and enhances natural resources for future generations, is environmentally sustainable, economically ambitious, and provides safe, nutritionally balanced, accessible food for all."

6.5 Joy noted that the FSA has been on the journey with DAERA from the very beginning thanked the FSA for the help and support throughout development.

6.6 In relation to the priorities contained within the Framework, Joy explained that the Framework consists of 8 principles and 4 priority areas. Joy focused on the 4 priority areas which are:

- Priority one – Enabling improved dietary related health outcomes through education and increased accessibility to healthy nutritious food
- Priority two – Building an environmentally sustainable and resilient agri-food supply chain
- Priority three – Building a prosperous food economy by boosting productivity and competitiveness in the food sector
- Priority four – Fostering a food-conscious society that values local produce and reduces food waste

6.7 The Committee discussed the importance of the priorities that have been identified as well as the importance of a holistic and joined up approach from all stakeholders and departments involved to deliver on them.

6.8 Joy noted that the Framework had been agreed by the Northern Ireland Executive and published in November 2024 which was a significant step. Members commended Joy and her team for what they have been able to achieve so far and noted their desire to help in any way that they could.

6.9 Committee considerations focused on priority one and how this interacts with the work that the FSA is doing in Northern Ireland in relation to nutrition, including the work around vending. The Committee discussed at length issues around food affordability and if there was anything that the Framework could do to address it. They highlighted the impact that the minimum wage has on the affordability of food. However, following discussions, Members were cognisant that the Framework itself would not be able to tackle this issue.

7. Presentation from Jennifer McGonagle – FSA involvement in the Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework

7.1 The Chair invited Jennifer McGonagle to deliver her presentation. Jennifer's presentation covered the FSA's involvement in the Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework so far.

7.2 Jennifer touched on the Food Strategy Framework strategic priorities highlighting that the FSA's involvement mostly falls under priority one.

7.3 Jennifer highlighted the Dietary Health team priorities for 2025/26 in relation to implementing nutritional standards and supporting food businesses to make the food environment healthier.

7.4 She also provided insight into the Making Food Better programme explaining its aim to support 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, providing nutritional information and delivering responsible promotions.

7.5 Jennifer touched on a number of the projects that the Dietary Health team has been working on in Northern Ireland, including developing and implementing nutritional standards for staff and visitors across catering facilities including retail outlets and vending; healthier and more sustainable vending and healthier catering tips for children's menus.

7.6 Jennifer also provided the Committee with an overview of the work that is currently underway. This includes mapping the density of fast-food outlets in Northern Ireland and investigating the relationship between fast-food outlet density, proximity to secondary schools and areas of deprivation.

7.7 She emphasised the interconnectedness between this work and the Framework. She explained that the team would continue to be involved in Framework delivery and had been feeding into the action plan that is being developed.

7.8 The consensus from the Committee was that the FSA in Northern Ireland is doing excellent work around nutrition. They acknowledged the breadth of what is involved in trying to change food behaviour, food culture and the food environment. Members discussed the challenges for the FSA and highlighted the importance of cross departmental working to successfully implement change.

8. Presentation from David Holmes – Department for Environment Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) Food Strategy

8.1 David Holmes provided the Committee with an overview of the work that Defra is undertaking in the development of a new National Food Strategy. David outlined the four priorities which have been announced – food security, health, economic growth and environmental sustainability. This provided the wider UK context for the Committee and current UK Government thinking on the future of the food system. David noted that the aim is to publish the Framework in Spring of this year. He highlighted that the FSA are particularly interested in the Growth, Health and Opportunities Mission.

8.2 David concluded his presentation by highlighting the Report from the House of Lords Food, Dietary and Obesity Committee which was published in October 2024. He noted the Government welcomed the report and recognised the scale of the challenge and committed to tackling it.

8.3 NIFAC discussed what assistance they could be in the FSA's work with and on the Strategy, with David noting the important work that is being done in Northern Ireland in relation to nutrition. Members asked about economic growth and noted that within DAERA there is a Robotics and Automation Group which is beneficial for productivity in industry providing support to reduce costs and increase output. The Committee expressed their interest in this being incorporated into the Framework.

9. Presentation from Joy Alexander – Looking Ahead

9.1 The Chair invited Joy Alexander and Fiona Ferguson to deliver their next presentation. This was focused on the next steps for the Framework and the officials invited the Committee to provide insights.

9.2 Joy and Fiona noted that an action plan is currently being developed to support the delivery of the Framework. They again thanked the FSA for their involvement in the development of the action plan and noted the importance of actors across government and relevant stakeholders being involved in development.

9.3 The Committee shared their perspective, providing their thoughts/views on the priorities outlined in the Framework and how these could be delivered. The Committee had a beneficial discussion in relation to the next steps for the Framework in Northern Ireland. Members discussed the importance of the FSA's role and contributions moving forward – particularly in relation to priority one. There was a conversation of how progress will be measured and how it will be reported.

9.4 Members emphasised that the Framework presents a number of opportunities and noted the importance of all departments, district councils and stakeholders across Northern Ireland being involved.

10. AOB

10.1 The Chair confirmed that the next NIFAC meeting is due to take place on Wednesday 19th March 2025. This will be a Board Preparation meeting ahead of the March Board meeting.