

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Minutes of the Themed Meeting on Wednesday 9th April 2025

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Meeting on Wednesday 9th April 2025 at Food Standards Agency, Belfast, 10 Clarendon Road, Belfast, BT1 3BG

NIFAC Members

- Anthony Harbinson – Chair
- Mike Johnston – NIFAC Member
- Ciaran McCartan – NIFAC Member
- Janice McConnell – NIFAC Member
- Cathal McDonnell – NIFAC Member
- David Torrens – NIFAC Member
- Lynne McMullan – NIFAC Member

Presenters

- Professor Robin May – FSA Chief Scientific Adviser (remotely)
- Daniel Lloyd – Head of Cell Cultivated Product Risk Assessment Team
- Joshua Ravenhill – Head of Cell Cultivated Product Sandbox Programme
- Sophie Almond – Senior Policy Manager – Cell Cultivated Product Sandbox

FSA Officials

- 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
- Victoria King – Private Secretary to the Chief Scientific Adviser
- Sian Bowsley – Director of Wales (remotely)
- Rhian Hayward – FSA Board Member and Chair of the Welsh Food Advisory Committee (remotely)
- Aoibheann Dunne – Head of Science and Surveillance (remotely)

- Aoibheann Swail – Nutrition Science Adviser (remotely)
- Mark Bond – Senior Policy Manager Cell Cultivated Product (CCP) Sandbox (remotely)
- Melanie Harris – Head of Cell Cultivated Products Policy (remotely)
- Michaela Dobbin – Assembly Liaison Adviser (remotely)

Apologies

- Judith Hanvey – NIFAC Member
- Anjali Juneja – Director of UK and International Affairs

1. Welcome and Housekeeping

- 1.1. The Chair welcomed all NIFAC Members, FSA officials and presenters to the meeting.
- 1.2. The Chair introduced and welcomed new NIFAC Member David Torrens.
- 1.3. The Chair reminded the Committee that they had been provided with briefing material to read that gave a useful background and overview of Cell Cultivated Products (CCPs). Furthermore, the briefing pack helpfully provided areas and questions for the Committee to consider.

2. Declarations of Interest

- 2.1 The Chair asked if members had any interests to declare.
- 2.2 Committee Member, Mike Johnston, declared his appointment to the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA) Non-Executive Board which has also been reflected in his Declaration of Interests. The Chair congratulated Mike on his recent appointment.

3. Minutes of the Previous Meeting on 9th April 2025

- 3.1 The Chair asked if there were any comments on the minutes of the previous NIFAC meeting held on 9th April 2025.
- 3.2 Members agreed the minutes as an accurate record of the meeting.

4. Welcome from Professor Robin May, FSA Chief Scientific Adviser

- 4.1 The Chair invited Professor Robin May to address the Committee.
- 4.2 Robin noted that the launch of the Sandbox had generated a lot of media coverage which has consequently created a lot of interest from the public. He emphasised that there is a strong feeling that the FSA is leading the way in terms of innovative regulation, supporting businesses while making sure tasks are completed safely.
- 4.3 Robin added that the key purpose of the Sandbox is safety. Public conversations have focused on wider impacts including animal welfare, agriculture, what is natural, what is artificial, and religious beliefs. Robin explained that the team is working collaboratively across the four nations and internationally.
- 4.4 The Committee thanked Robin for sharing his insights on CCPs and asked if there were any universities or businesses involved with this work in Northern Ireland. Robin explained that work on the broader engineering biology, which is directly linked to CCPs, bioreactors, structural processing – which is putting different cells together – and derivation of the cell line are all

beneficial for Northern Ireland but noted that there are no businesses directly involved presently.

5. Presentation from Daniel Lloyd – Team Leader Regulated Products, Risk Assessment, CCP Sandbox

5.1 The chair invited Daniel Lloyd to deliver his presentation. Daniel's presentation covered the scientific background of CCPs, giving an overview of the science that underpins the production of CCPs for food; how it feeds into the risk assessment process and how we ensure they will be safe for human consumption if they reach the market.

5.2 Daniel noted that CCPs are novel, highly innovative and have the potential to meet growing food demands while reducing the environmental impact compared to traditional agriculture. Unlike typical regulated products, CCPs involve both a novel production process and a novel end product, making risk assessment and safety conclusions more challenging.

5.3 Daniel simplified the process touching on:

- How the cells are collected
- Cell selection
- Immortalised cell lines
- How cells are grown
- Cell harvesting and processing

5.4 After explaining the production process, Daniel talked about where we currently are in relation to the risk assessment. Daniel informed the Committee that risk assessment is a holistic process that evaluates all elements of the final product, including production and ingredient sourcing. Key potential hazards and uncertainties include:

- Cell Line Identification and Management: Ensuring long-term storage and consistency of the cell line is crucial
- Growth Media Composition: Addressing the complex requirements for cell growth, which may involve nutrients not commonly found in the human diet
- Production Process: Identifying both known and novel hazards introduced by this innovative process
- Toxicology: Determining appropriate testing levels to ensure safety, especially for components used early in production that may be undetectable in the final product

5.5 Daniel concluded his presentation mentioning the regulatory situation of CCPs. The UK is among several countries working on regulating CCPs. The USA, Singapore, Israel, Australia and New Zealand have already approved these products. As part of the sandbox initiative, one of the core aims is to complete two risk assessments before its conclusion. This is a significant step towards potential future authorisations. The sandbox is also learning from best practices of established regulatory guidance from other countries.

5.6 The Committee found Daniel's presentation informative, focusing on cell selection and growth. Daniel explained the process and addressed questions about precision breeding and hybrid meats, noting that it is hypothetically possible but not yet seen. Regarding hormones and antibiotics in growth media, Daniel stated most companies minimise antibiotic use, relying on bioreactors for sterility. Hormones are used, and residue levels will be assessed. The novel foods framework allows flexibility, with clear guidance expected in 18 months to 2 years.

6. Presentation from Joshua Ravenhill – Head of CCP Sandbox Programme

6.1 The Chair invited Joshua Ravenhill to deliver his presentation. Joshua's presentation covered the sandbox vision, scope and deliverables painting a picture of the economy, how many

companies there are and what they are producing to help understand CCPs.

6.2 Joshua explained the UK has at least 30 companies producing alternative proteins, with this number growing. The UK is also seen as an attractive export market for companies in Europe and beyond, due to its population's preference for alternative proteins compared to the rest of Europe.

6.3 Joshua's presentation covered the following:

- Production quantities
- Market availability
- Safety hazards
- Regulatory requirements
- Selection methodology
- Participants and non-participants

6.4 Joshua discussed the three objectives set to achieve their mission and outcomes; these are listed below:

1. Agree approaches to food safety
2. Address essential questions and provide regulatory clarity
3. Provide enhanced engagement with industry

6.5 Joshua noted that over the next two years, they will conduct regular workshops with companies, trade bodies, and academic organisations, focusing on safety hazards and regulatory questions. They aim to gather knowledge and views on these topics.

6.6 The Committee thanked Joshua for his presentation and enquired about IT handling and safe spaces. The Committee noted various approaches and associated costs. They asked about participant benefits, which include early consultations, identifying viable research lines, and gaining sector leadership. Being part of the sandbox enhances credibility with investors, as participants influence discussions and engage directly with the regulatory agency.

7. Presentation from Sophie Almond, Senior Policy Manager – CCP Sandbox

7.1 The Chair invited Sophie to deliver her presentation. Sophie's presentation gave the Committee an overview of upcoming workshops and associated networks. As part of the sandbox programme, they will run workshops to understand CCP hazards and address regulatory questions before authorising them for sale in the UK. The workshops aim to identify risks and evidence needed to mitigate them, and to tackle complex regulatory questions. Ultimately, they will publish guidance to help businesses navigate the market.

7.2 Sophie explained the objectives of the workshops which are to inform participants, learn from participants, foster collaboration and gather crucial information.

7.3 Sophie's presentation also touched on key hazards, their aim to address policy questions, workshop scheduling and the Cross Government Network (CGN).

7.4 The Committee emphasised that the focus should be kept on the safety of CCPs and recommended that the scope was kept manageable with clear KPIs.

8. Presentation from Sophie Almond, Senior Policy Manager – CCP Sandbox

8.1 The Chair asked Sophie to deliver her second presentation which covered four nation working and nation specific factors.

8.2 Sophie explained that the CCP sandbox programme is run in association with Food Standards Scotland, aiming to refine policy creation across the UK. The programme involves four-nation collaboration, regular meetings and expert involvement. When making decisions, key considerations including the Windsor Framework, EU Authorisation and stakeholder engagement will be considered. There will be six-weekly meetings to monitor progress and regular reports will be shared with relevant Boards and stakeholders.

8.3 Sophie concluded the presentation by discussing nation specific factors for Northern Ireland, explaining the sandbox programme will address several factors relevant to Northern Ireland, including FSA responsibilities, stakeholder interests, stakeholder engagement and ethical, social and environmental information.

8.4 The consensus from the Committee was that Sophie's presentation was very informative, with members emphasising that the four-nation approach is key. Members discussed the importance of the Windsor Framework considerations. The Committee thanked all the presenters and Joshua and Sophie for attending in person.

9. Directors' Update

9.1 The Chair invited Andy Cole, the Director for Northern Ireland, to deliver his update.

9.2 Andy noted that Baroness Hayman's recent meeting with the FSA Chair, Professor Susan Jebb, had been beneficial. He added that following the meeting, the Chair and Baroness Hayman visited a flour mill and met with the General Managers of two mills located in Belfast, as well as the Chief Executive of UK Flour Millers.

9.3 Andy confirmed that since the written report had been published with the papers, the Northern Ireland Executive had approved budgets across Northern Ireland, with a minor increase on the FSA's resource budget. However, this is absorbed by increased pay and prices across payroll and programme lines and will require a careful prioritisation of the budget.

9.4 Andy discussed the Food Standards Delivery Model with teams focusing on the implementation of the new approach to food standards inspections across all district councils in Northern Ireland, making it more risk-based and intelligence driven.

9.5 Andy highlighted a number of other areas of work, including the launch of the consultation on proposed amendments to the Food Law Code of Practice as well as the Breakfast Directives consultation.

10. Chairs' Update

10.1 The Chair provided an update from the Board meeting which took place on 26th March in Hull. The Chair confirmed that he had fed back views and questions from the Committee during the Board meeting and ensured that Northern Ireland considerations were taken into account during deliberations.

10.2 The Chair informed the Committee that he had attended the Northern Ireland Leadership and Governance Conference which took place at the beginning of April. During the day, both he and Andy had the opportunity to engage with a number of key stakeholders, including Mike Farrar, the new Permanent Secretary at the Department of Health.

10.3 Looking ahead, the Chair noted the dates for the Balmoral Show and the launch event for the FSA's Annual Report on Food Standards. The Chair informed the Committee that the team would be exploring the possibility of holding the next Board Preparation as a joint meeting with WFAC.

11. AOB

11.1 The Chair confirmed that the next NIFAC meeting is a Board Preparation Meeting, due to take place in June.