

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Directors' Report October 2025

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1. Executive Summary

1.1 This report provides a summary of activities relevant to the FSA's remit in Northern Ireland since the last written report to the Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) in July 2025.

1.2 Members are invited to:

- Note the update and
- Invite the Directors to expand on any issues for further discussion.

2. Chief Executive's Report to the Board

2.1 The latest Chief Executive Report that was presented to the September Board meeting can be found [here](#).

3. Overview from the Director of UK and International Affairs (UKIA)

3.1 This section provides an overview of some of the key work undertaken by the Director of UKIA, Anjali Juneja, that will be of interest to NIFAC since the last report in July.

3.2 Over the last number of months, my work has had a keen focus on Northern Ireland with the FSA Board meeting taking place in Belfast in September. This was the first Board meeting for four of our [six new Board members](#), some of whom NIFAC members have had the opportunity to meet.

3.3 Alongside the Board meeting, the FSA Chair, Professor Susan Jebb, undertook several engagements during her time in Northern Ireland. She met with First Minister, Michelle O'Neill MLA, and deputy First Minister, Emma Little-Pengelly MLA for the first time. She also met with the Minister of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, Andrew Muir MLA, with important discussions on topics such as the Northern Ireland Food Strategy Framework, specifically in relation to the areas where the FSA is a named delivery partner. The final Ministerial engagement during the visit was with the Minister of Health, Mike Nesbitt MLA, where conversations continued in relation to food safety and public health, specifically focusing on the FSA's nutrition remit in Northern Ireland.

3.4 Following the Ministerial engagements, both the Chair and Chief Executive, Katie Pettifer, had the opportunity to meet with the Chair and Chief Executive of the Food Safety Authority of

Ireland. With the unique operating context on the island of Ireland, collaborative working between the organisations is key, particularly in relation to food and feed incidents.

3.5 The Board and Executive Management Team also undertook several visits during our time in Northern Ireland with members split across three visits – Thompsons Feed Mill, the Institute for Global Food Security at Queen’s University Belfast, and the Belfast Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Inspection Facility. I attended the visit to the SPS Inspection Facility, and it was great to be able to meet with officials from across Competent Authorities to hear about the work they undertake, as well as having the opportunity to undertake a tour of the new facilities.

3.6 In relation to wider work, the FSA continues to work across Government to carefully consider and understand the public health implications of an SPS agreement with the EU. While the UK Government will be negotiating the deal on behalf of the UK, we are supporting its efforts to work on a four-country basis and will engage closely with government departments across the UK. The UK Government has also been clear that an agreement must deliver tangible benefits for businesses and consumers in Northern Ireland. The UK and EU will continue to apply existing controls while the UK Government negotiates an agreement. Both the UK and the EU stress the importance of the two main agreements that underpin the relationship: the Withdrawal Agreement, including the Windsor Framework, and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement and have reaffirmed the commitment to their full, timely, and faithful implementation. In July 2025, the European Commission published a recommendation authorising the opening of negotiations between the UK and the EU and setting out draft EU parameters for these negotiations. This has not yet been agreed by EU leaders.

3.7 NIFAC members will be aware that at the FSA Board meeting in June, the Board [reviewed](#) the latest risk assessment findings and endorsed advice that slush-ice drinks containing glycerol are not suitable for children under seven. Following the Board meeting, we launched a public awareness campaign to highlight the risks of glycerol in slush-ice drinks. The new guidance advises that these drinks are unsuitable for children under seven, and that those aged seven to 10 should have no more than one 350ml serving per day. We are working with industry and local authorities, including district councils in Northern Ireland, to support implementation and have published a toolkit on the FSA website to aid consistency in messaging. Major retailers have agreed to display warning signs, and we are encouraging wider uptake. Surveillance is underway to assess glycerol levels in products and monitor compliance with voluntary labelling and health warnings. The team plans to evaluate the impact of the guidance over the coming months.

4. Update from the Director for Northern Ireland

4.1 **Lough Neagh** – Following the onset of a significant algal bloom in Lough Neagh during summer 2023, we commenced a sampling programme and have continued to monitor the levels of cyanotoxins in fish in Lough Neagh to inform risk management advice. During 2024/25 we tested various species of fish from the lough, to determine the levels and types of toxins that may be present in fish as a result of blue-green algae. The latest results show that cyanotoxins have been detected in the viscera of the fish and, for the first time, in the flesh of some fish. These results, compared to the Tolerable Daily Intake levels established by the World Health Organisation, are not considered a health concern. FSA toxicologists have confirmed that fish – like bream, trout, perch, pollan and eel – remain safe to eat. As with previous findings, levels of toxins were higher in the gut and liver than in the flesh of fish exposed to the algal bloom.

4.2 There has been no amendment to the FSA’s existing advice that recreational anglers should ensure that they only eat edible flesh of fish which have been properly gutted, and that the fillets are rinsed with clean water to remove any contamination from the gutting process. Commercial fisheries should also follow good processing procedures such as proper evisceration to remove intestines, liver and gills where cyanotoxins can accumulate. A [news story](#) in relation to the

findings has been published confirming the latest testing results. As part of this, Professor Robin May undertook several media interviews to reassure the public and reinforce advice to recreational anglers.

4.3 We are continuing to sample fish from Lough Neagh during 2025/26 for cyanotoxins to determine whether there are any long-term trends and whether there is any need for further updates of the risk management advice.

4.4 **Cell Cultivated Products Presentation** – Students from University College Dublin's Food and Agriculture Sustainable Technology Innovation Programme (FAST-IP) visited the Belfast office to learn more about the FSA's CCP Sandbox. The engagement was led by the Standards team in Northern Ireland, with support from CCP Sandbox colleagues. The event covered an overview of the FSA in Northern Ireland, the CCP Sandbox and its impacts in Northern Ireland.

4.5 **Plant-based Drinks Assessment** – Officials represented Northern Ireland as a government observer on the Scientific Advisory Committee on Nutrition (SACN). SACN and the Committee on Toxicology (COT) have [published](#) their assessment comparing cows' milk with plant-based drinks available in the UK, with recommendations for adults and children aged one year and over. The assessment covers both the nutritional and toxicological risk/benefits of plant-based drinks and makes a number of recommendations for government, industry and research. Officials are disseminating the results to stakeholders to inform specific policy areas such as school food standards and nutrition resources developed by stakeholders.

4.6 **District council (DC) Workshops** – 'Health and nutritional information on food and food supplements' – Two scenario-based workshops took place in August. The workshops focused on building upon existing understanding and knowledge and to inform the practical application of the relevant rules. Feedback has been very positive, highlighting the value of working through practical examples. The scenarios covered a broad range of areas including health and nutrition claims, nutrition declarations, supplements rules and novel foods.

4.7 **Local Authority Engagement** – A Local Authority event took place in June. It was led by our Local Authority Policy and Delivery team with support from the Regulatory Compliance Division. The event covered several areas, including: a proposal for published KPIs of DC performance on food hygiene and food safety; LA data project; LA resourcing and cost recovery.

4.8 **Publications** – Over the last number of months, we have published several reports and pieces of research. The entries below provide a short overview of a number of these publications.

4.9 **Pancake Reformulation** – Pancake reformulation guidance, which was developed in collaboration with the College of Agriculture, Food and Rural Enterprise (CAFRE), was [published](#) in June. An associated launch event took place, which was attended by 43 industry stakeholders including manufacturers, bakeries, suppliers, and catering colleges. Attendees sampled reformulated pancakes, toured technical facilities, and received copies of the guidance. Presentations from the FSA, CAFRE, ingredient suppliers, and Invest NI covered consumer insights and funding opportunities. Kantar data shared by Invest NI showed that Northern Ireland consumers spent £17 million on pancakes in 2024, highlighting the region's high consumption and the importance of reformulation. The event also explored how reformulation can help businesses improve Nutrient Profile Model scores and how this links with policies on promotions and advertising.

4.10 **Fast Food Density Research** – "The availability of fast food outlets in Northern Ireland and their distance from secondary schools" and associated [interactive maps](#) was [published](#) in June.

Key findings show:

- In Northern Ireland on average there are 2.2 fast food outlets within a 400m radius of a secondary school and on average 0.8 grocery retailers within a 400m radius
- The largest number of fast food outlets located within 400m of a secondary school is 21
- Almost one in five (17%) schools in Northern Ireland have 5 or more fast food outlets within a 400m radius
- 50% of schools have no fast food outlets within a 400m radius while 56% of schools have no grocery retailers within a 400m radius.
- Of the secondary schools with no grocery retailers within 400m, 20% have at least one fast food outlet within 400m
- Across Northern Ireland, there are approximately 2.5 times as many secondary schools with one or more fast food outlets in the most deprived areas compared to the least; and approximately 3 times as many secondary schools with one or more grocery retailers in the most deprived areas compared to the least.

4.11 Literature Review – A literature review investigating strategies to improve children's menu offerings in restaurant settings was [published](#) in September.

Key findings show:

- Community projects which involve close collaboration between restaurant owners and intervention teams, may help independent restaurants to make their children's menus healthier
- Giving away free toys with healthier meals may encourage children to choose smaller, low-calorie meals over larger ones
- Designing menus so that healthier items are the default options may encourage parents and children to choose healthier options
- Mandatory legislation and voluntary schemes were not found to be effective in making children's menus healthier, in this literature review
- Additionally, calorie labelling on menus, signposting strategies, and changing social norms around healthy eating were also not found to be effective in making children's menus healthier, in this literature review.

4.12 National Diet and Nutrition Survey – In partnership with safefood and the Department of Health, we hosted the launch event for the publication of the [latest](#) Northern Ireland National Diet and Nutrition Survey (NDNS) report in September. Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Dr Naresh Chada, provided the opening address at the launch event which aimed to facilitate expert discussions around improving the dietary intake and nutritional status of those in Northern Ireland. The event had over 70 attendees from a range of sectors. The NDNS is a continuous cross-sectional survey, designed to assess the diet, nutrient intake and nutritional status of the general population aged 18 months and over living in private households in the UK. To provide a representative sample of the Northern Ireland population, each fieldwork year, the FSA, the Department of Health and safefood, fund the additional recruitment of around 100 adults, aged 19 years and older and 100 children, aged 18 months to 18 years living in Northern Ireland to be surveyed. The survey reports that between 2017 – 2023 the population consumed too much saturated fat and added sugar, and not enough fruit, vegetables, oily fish and fibre compared with current government recommendations.

4.13 Vending Evaluation – An evaluation of the implementation of vending nutritional standards at three pilot sites – a leisure centre, a public sector office building and public courts – was [published](#) in September. The key findings show that nutritional standards can be applied successfully and achieve a reduction in calories without incurring a reduction in sales, if products are substituted with lower calorie alternatives that are similar in type and appeal to the original offerings. Consumer feedback emphasised a preference for familiar products with reduced calories rather than products that were notably different to the original offerings. The findings also show that substituting drinks with lower sugar options consistently reduced sugar and calories with minimal revenue impact. Importantly, the vending operator must be engaged in the process

to ensure they understand what products are compliant and how standards should be implemented.

4.14 Nutritional Standards – Revised Nutritional Standards for Health and Social Care were launched in September, in partnership with the Department of Health, the Public Health Agency and safefood. The updates were created through collaboration between funding partners, catering, dietetics, and procurement. A new section for private retail outlets has been added which has 7 standards including fibre targets and calorie caps for savoury snacks and drinks. A launch event took place at the end of September, which included remarks from the Minister of Health. Alongside funding partners, we also hosted a workshop on Nutritional Standards for other government departments to support the implementation of Nutritional Standards across the wider public sector.

4.15 Retail Intelligence Survey – The FSA Retail Intelligence Survey 2024/25 [report](#) was published. This project conducts targeted surveillance sampling of retail food products in Northern Ireland, England and Wales to identify emerging food safety risks and enhance the FSA's intelligence on the food system. A total of 822 food samples from 24 different food commodity types were purchased from physical and online retailers and were tested for compliance with relevant food regulations. Of the samples tested for allergens, 96% were deemed compliant, whilst 4% indicated the presence of an undeclared allergen. Milk was the most common undeclared allergen found. Comms have released a pro-active story based around the updating of the caffeine supplement advice for industry following the results received.

4.16 Antimicrobial Resistance in Retail Meats – The FSA's mandatory anonymised reporting of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) in retail meats under EU Regulation 2020/1729 has been returned to the EU. The team also [published](#) a corresponding FSA report. This anonymised reporting covers antimicrobial resistant *Escherichia coli* (AMR-E. coli) isolated from 600 fresh broilers (chicken) and turkey samples purchased for retail sale in Northern Ireland from January – December 2024. The findings show that AMR-E. coli (ESBL/AmpC) prevalence was 12% from 600 raw fresh turkey and chicken samples. This correlates with 2022 UK levels and remains lower than most EU countries. No isolates were resistant to last line antibiotics, including colistin and carbapenems and the risk of acquiring AMR related infections is very low with proper food handling and cooking practices.

5. Consultations

5.1 Current live FSA consultations can be found [here](#).

6. Forward Look

- 16th October – Northern Ireland Food and Drink Association Annual Dinner
- 22nd October – British Veterinary Association Northern Ireland Annual Dinner