

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Minutes of the Themed Meeting on Tuesday 1st July 2025

Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) Meeting on Tuesday 1st July 2025 at Food Standards Agency, Belfast, 10 Clarendon Road, Belfast, BT1 3BG

NIFAC Members

- Anthony Harbinson – Chair
- Ciaran McCartan – NIFAC Member
- Janice McConnell – NIFAC Member
- Cathal McDonnell – NIFAC Member
- David Torrens – NIFAC Member

Presenters

- Keith Minnis – Head of Windsor Framework Delivery
- Mark O'Neill – Head of Trade Imports and Exports
- Simon Dadd – Head of Borders TOM Programme

FSA Officials

- Andy Cole – Director for Northern Ireland
- Anjali Juneja – Director of UK and International Affairs (remotely)
- Firth Piracha – Head of EU Relations, Trade and Legislation
- Philip Kennedy – Head of Food Safety Policy and Delivery
- Roberta Ferson – Head of Corporate Services and Strategic Engagement
- Ruth Watson – Head of Audit, Business Support, Assembly Liaison and Communications (remotely)
- Jayne McGlaughlin – Senior Adviser – Assembly Liaison
- Jamie Young – NIFAC Secretariat
- Eleanor McKeegan – Head of EU Relations and Legal

Apologies

- Judith Hanvey – NIFAC Member
- Mike Johnston – NIFAC Member
- Lynne McMullan – NIFAC Member
- Sharon Gilmore – Head of Standards and Dietary Health

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 the meeting would be interactive, comprising presentations and group exercises.

1.3. The Chair informed the Committee that the agenda had been slightly revised to include discussion immediately following each session, removing the need for a separate discussion period at the end of the meeting.

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 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. Directors' Update

4.1 The Chair invited both Anjali and Andy to deliver the Directors' Update.

4.2 Anjali provided an update on the budget, noting that the Northern Ireland Executive approved budgets across Northern Ireland departments, with the FSA receiving a minor increase on the resource budgets of £500k and £151k against the capital bid of £251k.

4.3 Anjali noted that a significant proportion of her time is currently focused on Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) related issues. She confirmed that the FSA is working across Government to carefully consider and understand the public health implications of an SPS agreement with the EU.

4.4 Anjali highlighted that since the last report to NIFAC, there have been positive and constructive interactions with Ministers and departmental counterparts, including the Department of Health and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (DAERA).

4.5 Anjali reflected on the launch event for the Annual Report on Food Standards which took place in Parliament Buildings in June, with both Minister Nesbitt and Minister Muir providing remarks on the day.

4.6 Andy then updated the Committee about the June Board meeting where he delivered the Northern Ireland Director's Annual Report. He noted that the paper was well received, with the Board being content with the current direction and the proposed forward work plan.

4.7 From the written report to NIFAC, Andy highlighted that updates to district councils' Management Information Systems had been completed, and all 11 district councils were working under the new Food Standards Delivery Model.

4.8 Andy highlighted the range of engagement that had taken place in recent months, including the Balmoral Show and meetings with various stakeholders.

5. Chair's Update

5.1 The Chair noted that the past few weeks were particularly busy with a range of events and engagements. The Balmoral Show was a highlight, with strong attendance and a vibrant atmosphere. Anthony noted that the range of positive engagement that had taken place at

Balmoral, including with Ministers and a range of stakeholders. He reflected on the launch event for the Annual Report, noting the attendance of both Minister Nesbitt and Minister Muir.

5.2 Anthony confirmed that he also attended a successful Local Authority Engagement event at the end of June which highlighted the strong and positive working relationships between district councils (DCs) and the FSA in Northern Ireland.

6. Presentation from Keith Minnis – Head of Windsor Framework Delivery and Mark O'Neill – Head of Trade Imports and Exports

6.1 The Chair invited Keith and Mark to deliver their presentation on Operational Delivery.

6.2 Keith's presentation provided an overview of the Windsor Framework as well as the import roles and responsibilities. He informed the Committee that in Northern Ireland, the FSA is the Central Competent Authority (CCA) for public health aspects of food and feed and works to protect consumers' wider interests in food. Furthermore, Keith explained that DCs and DAERA are responsible for food safety and conducting import checks at Points of Entry (POE). The Committee explored the division of responsibilities between the FSA, DCs and DAERA.

6.3 Following this, Keith invited Mark to provide an overview of the infrastructure requirements under the Windsor Framework.

6.4 Mark informed the Committee that under the Windsor Framework, four new Northern Ireland SPS facilities are required, which must be both legally compliant and adequately staffed. He highlighted that both DC and DAERA portal staff are using contingency facilities; however, the transition to fully developed infrastructure is progressing at pace. He outlined the four key locations—Foyle, Warrenpoint, Larne, and Belfast—and noted that all sites are now carbon neutral, with significant progress achieved in a short time.

6.5 To set the wider context, the Committee was provided with an overview of the Northern Ireland Retail Movement Scheme, OCR, Unfettered Market Access and UK/EU divergence.

6.6 As part of this session, NIFAC members were presented with a number of scenarios to discuss and respond to. This provided members with an opportunity to see the complexities associated with the work and to understand more about the practical outworkings.

6.7 The Committee recognised the complexity of the work in this area and commended the team for their efforts. During the session, members explored key trade concepts to better understand the logistical challenges involved. They also expressed strong interest in the progress of the four SPS facilities and were particularly impressed by the achievement of carbon neutrality at each site.

7. Presentation from Keith Minnis – Head of Windsor Framework Delivery and Simon Dadd – Head of Borders TOM Programme

7.1 The Chair invited Keith and Simon to deliver their presentation on Horizon Scanning.

7.2 This focused on a UK/EU SPS agreement. The session examined the Common Understanding text issued after the UK-EU Summit and its implications for the FSA and the Northern Ireland food system. Keith explained that the Common Understanding document, published as part of the summit, initiated negotiations in several areas, including a commitment to an SPS agreement. During his presentation, Keith outlined how an agreement might operate in practice, including key operational aspects and exceptions.

7.3 The Committee took part in an exercise exploring the Northern Ireland food system and the potential impacts of an SPS agreement. They highlighted likely consumer benefits with minimal

downsides, though noted that innovation could be delayed. Risks and concerns were also discussed.

7.4 Simon then gave the Committee a high-level overview of what an agreement would mean for the UK. He began by explaining the concept of dynamic alignment and the importance of access to key systems, agencies, and databases for effective implementation. Simon also discussed the implications for food safety management. He then described the FSA's preparations, including the formation of a dedicated programme team, active involvement in shaping government negotiation positions, and participation in technical discussions ahead of formal talks expected in the autumn.

7.5 Simon's overview provided information on what an SPS agreement could mean for the UK as a whole. He focused on dynamic alignment, trade context, regulatory approach, system access (ASD), import listings and safeguards, food safety management and operational impacts.

7.6 The Committee acknowledged the complexity of an SPS agreement and the expected implementation period. Members noted that industry values certainty, even if temporary, and discussed how market authorisations would operate under a new agreement. They recognised the need for stakeholders to adapt and welcomed the implementation period as a chance to gain clarity. Members expressed appreciation for the work presented, noting how valuable and informative it was – particularly for those less familiar with the complexities involved. Members recognised the significant effort required from the FSA and commended the team for their contributions. The Committee also emphasised the importance of the FSA's involvement in decision-making, highlighting that being at the table ensures critical implications are properly considered across government.

7.7 Members noted that they appreciated the interactive format of both sessions and the opportunity to engage in practical exercises. Given the complexity of the subject matter, they found it refreshing and valuable to apply the information to scenarios.

8. AOB

8.1 The Chair confirmed that the next NIFAC meeting will be a Board Preparation Meeting, scheduled for September. He also reminded the Committee that the FSA Board will be convening in Belfast in September.