



Heather Hancock
Chair
Food Standards Agency
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03 December 2018

Dear Heather

REPORT FROM THE NORTHERN IRELAND FOOD ADVISORY COMMITTEE TO THE CHAIR OF THE FOOD STANDARDS AGENCY ON ISSUES DISCUSSED BY THE COMMITTEE: NOVEMBER 2018

The key role of the Food Advisory Committees is to advise the Board of the Food Standards Agency. To that end, the Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee (NIFAC) met in open session on 28 November to discuss the following papers, due to be considered at the upcoming meeting of the FSA Board.

- Incident Management post EU exit
- Regulating Our Future - Review of Delivery of Food Standards Official Controls and Next Steps
- Progress and Future Direction of Social Science in the FSA
- Raw Drinking Milk (RDM) Triggers for Review
- EU Exit Update

Discussions on these items were led by presentations from: Philip Randles; Michael Jackson; Michelle Patel; Michael Wight, Kevin Hargin and Narriman Looch; and Rod Ainsworth respectively and I am grateful to them for assisting the Committee's discussions.

NIFAC also heard an update on the work that the Standards and Dietary Health Team in Northern Ireland is undertaking around allergens from Louise Connolly, a Senior Adviser for Standards and Dietary Health with the FSA in NI, and I would like to extend my thanks to her also.

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Allergens Update.

Louise Connolly delivered a presentation giving an update on the work of the FSA in NI's Standards and Dietary Health team around allergens focussing on the Easy to ASK Campaign.

NIFAC welcomed this very informative update and were impressed by the media related achievements of the Easy to ASK campaign, particularly in the successful partnership with Cool FM, with 2,043 competition entries, making it one of the highest entered competitions that the station has ever run. It was also good to hear that a post-project evaluation was taking place as an understanding of the reasons for the success of the partnership will be key to recreating this success in future campaigns.

The presentation highlighted the need for allergy sufferers to see allergies as a 'normal' condition to avoid any stigma that sufferers might feel attached to raising the issue. Anecdotally, NIFAC members felt that this is beginning to happen, evidenced by the approach often taken in schools to talking about the reasons for not permitting certain ingredients on their premises. Conversely it was cautioned that a ubiquity of purported but undiagnosed food sensitivities can lead to them becoming seen as fashionable thing to have, undermining the seriousness of food allergies and the consequences of ignoring them.

The Committee were reassured to hear that there is a strong cross agency approach in NI and elsewhere in the UK to this issue which involves Department of Health, Public Health Agency and Department for Education.

Incident Management Post EU Exit

Philip Randles, the FSA's Acting Head of the Incidents & Resilience Unit, attended the meeting by teleconference to introduce this item on a paper due to be discussed at the upcoming meeting of the FSA Board.

It was noted that the current withdrawal agreement as being presented to Parliament would allow for continued access to the RASFF system. NIFAC noted, however, that the FSA is rightly making their plans according to the most difficult scenario in which the UK leaves the EU without an agreement. The mutual benefit to both the UK and the EU of continued access to the RASFF system was also noted and it was encouraging to hear about the positive reaction across EU member states as well as from third countries, to the approach the FSA has been taking.

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The Four Country approach outlined in the paper was endorsed by Committee Members who also noted the close relationship with the Food Safety Authority of Ireland to take account of issues relating to the land border with NI.

Regulating Our Future – Review of Delivery of Food Standards Official Controls and Next Steps

Michael Jackson, the FSA's Head of Standards & Assurance, introduced this item on a paper due to be discussed at the upcoming meeting of the FSA Board.

NIFAC noted that District Councils in NI had done well to ensure that the right personnel were available to carry out standards inspections. They were pleased to hear about the resource that had been provided to the councils in NI from the FSA in giving support to EHOs to give confidence and in assisting with answering queries. It was noted that NI is not a source of the same level of concern for the delivery of standards official controls and it was suggested that this relationship with the Councils could be part of the reason for that.

A question was raised over impediments to England importing the NI model for the delivery of standards official controls. It was noted that the division in responsibilities between Environmental Health and Trading Standards made for a more complex system and that the generally larger portfolio of Local Authorities in England gave food standards official controls a lower priority. There remained doubts among NIFAC members that the NI model could not work in England, accepting that implementing that model on a very different Local Authority system would not be straightforward.

An observer to the meeting from the Chartered Institute of Environmental Health raised a concern from NI's District Councils that delivery of standards official controls is an issue that only presents significant difficulties in one of the three countries within the FSA's jurisdiction and that a 'one-size-fits-all' approach across the UK would present a risk to effective delivery in NI. Maria Jennings, as the Director for Regulatory Compliance, was able to give assurance that there will be no diminution of the good work that takes place in NI and a 'one-size-fits-all' approach would be neither pursued nor imposed.

Progress and Future Direction of Social Science in the FSA

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Michelle Patel, the FSA's Head of Social Science Transformation introduced this item, by teleconference due to be discussed at the upcoming meeting of the FSA Board.

The rising emphasis being placed on behavioural science was noted by NIFAC as well as the potential for this to have an impact on food safety, giving the ability to have an effect on, not just what goes into food, but also how it is treated by the consumer.

The enthusiasm for the work was evident from Michelle's presentation and NIFAC expressed their support for what the team is doing. It was noted that this work may not be of a greater importance now than it had previously been but that its importance, being better understood, means it is now receiving increased attention and this was welcomed.

Raw Drinking Milk (RDM) Triggers for Review

Michael Wight, FSA Director of Policy with Kevin Hargin, Head of Food Hygiene and Animal Feed, and Narriman Looch of the Food Hygiene Policy team, joined the meeting by teleconference to introduce this item on a paper due to be discussed at the upcoming meeting of the FSA Board.

The Committee asked about the threshold for failed hygiene indicator samples and outbreaks associated with RDM and were reassured to hear that even in circumstances where the stated thresholds had not been exceeded, for failed hygiene indicator samples, monitoring would take place and the cause and nature of pathogen related to any outbreak would be taken into consideration in informing a response.

NIFAC also commented on the need for RDM producers to take responsibility as food businesses producing a risky food. The need for the FSA to ensure stronger, clearer, risk statements on the labelling was also emphasised by members. It was accepted that these statements may not dissuade many who perceive RDM to have benefits but would be necessary to protect the FSA reputationally in the event of any serious incident related to RDM.

I also raised the issue of a recent edition of the BBC programme Countryfile, which ran a piece on RDM emphasising many of the perceived benefits with little about the risks involved. It was suggested by the Committee that there may be value in contacting the BBC to highlight the FSA's position on RDM consumption. This would

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similarly allow the FSA to demonstrate consistency in its approach to RDM as a risky food.

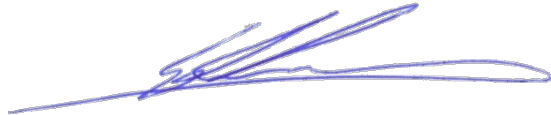
EU Exit Update

Rod Ainsworth, the FSA's Director of Strategy, Legal and Governance joined the meeting, by teleconference, giving an oral overview of the FSA's preparations ahead of the UK's exit from the EU.

NIFAC noted that the rate of developments around this subject would likely supersede any draft of a paper that could have been prepared for this meeting and was grateful to Rod for giving a verbal overview of the FSA's current preparations for EU exit.

Members were pleased to hear about the closer working relationship that had been developing recently between the FSA and Defra in contingency planning and were also pleased to hear that a previous obstacle to the laying of necessary Statutory Instruments had now been removed, giving an optimistic prospect to having a full regulatory regime for food in place by March 2019.

I am copying this letter to the Chief Executive.



pp. Colm McKenna (approved by Colm McKenna and signed in his absence)
Chair, Northern Ireland Food Advisory Committee

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